

Golden Sun: The Piano Man

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Summary: AU. Isaac is a piano player who brings ease to many with his soulful music in the Tavern of the Golden Sun. Times are tough for everyone at the bar, but the appearance of a stranger may very well change their lives forever. Chapter 8 now available.

***Chapter 1*: The Songless Nightingale**

Author's Note: I'm producing this new fic inspired by Billy Joel's famous hit song "The Piano Man". Naturally, it's an alternate universe fic that places our GS heroes and heroines in a 1920s- 1930s time period in good old Angara. I figured it was time to try to change the pace from the normal medieval time period without going science fiction. So, I figured the realist environment of that period was a nice change. Enjoy!

And by the way, to all you GS newbies with Lost Age, the one known as Piers in the game is known as Picard in this story. This is because I hate his American name and prefer his Japanese name. I mean, he sounds like a total wimp with his American name. And if you would be so kind, do not call him Piers in reviews either. Please use either Picard or Leon (which was his original American name until they decided to change it.) Picard is the preferable of the two. Thank you.

EDIT: Yeah, this is a small edit here to the first chapter. Considering new rule about songs in stories, that means that I had to remove the song *The Songless Nightingale* from this chapter. This also means you won't be seeing Billy Joel's famous song being quoted later on in the story, as I planned to do... though you may catch a great deal of references to it throughout. Think of it as a tribute, eh?

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coincidental. Whatever above that this story does not apply to belongs to me.

It was nine o'clock on a Saturday, and the regular crowd would soon shuffle in to the bar known as the Tavern of the Golden Sun. There was a young man behind the bar, pensively wiping out a beer mug with a soft cloth. The man was very tall and well built; he looked like he could take on an elephant in a wrestling match and win. His hair stood nearly straight up, and it was the same burning crimson color of his eyes. Those eyes didn't burn as though his hair did; they were more withdrawn and seemed to reflect a near perpetual melancholy. His clothes were fairly simple; he wore a brown apron over a brown vest and white shirt, and his pants were mat black. The man's shoes were also black, but they had seen so much weathering, they looked almost gray with age; like the hair on an ancient scholar's head. This man's name was Gareth; and he was now an orphan. His parents both had passed away from an outbreak of cholera three years before, and since then he had been living with the owner of this same tavern where he made what little salary the establishment could afford to pay him. However, this didn't make Gareth unhappy for many reasons.

There had been problems in Tolbi for many years now. Many struggled to find work at all, and most were either unemployed, starving, poverty-stricken, homeless, or any combination of the four. This economic depression came at a time of unparalleled prosperity for the major economic city, Tolbi. Many companies oversold their stocks to investors, causing massive inflation and the inability to pay off dividends, causing the entire capitalistic powerhouse that was their city to go collapsing to its knees. Tolbi wasn't the only city in the great nation of Angara to suffer from such a major depression. Virtually all of the country were suffering as much as the Tolbians, if not, more so.

Unfortunately, times like this brought out the worst in people, and many turned to lives of crime to stay from being poor or to just better themselves at the expense of someone else. Organized crime found its way to Tolbi, and it seemed as though most police officers were helpless to stop it. Not that all the mafia stuff mattered to Gareth. As long as he had his job at the bar and had a roof over his head. . . those were two of the three most important things to him.

The third? Perhaps the third was something more metaphysical or psychological, and perhaps it was not. Though, if anyone asked, Gareth's response would be that the third reason he remained happy was his fiancée, Jenna. It was Jenna's older brother Felix who offered Gareth the roof and job he desired and inadvertently provided him with the third reason, be it metaphysical, psychological, or something entirely different, for him to be content.

Garet turned his eyes toward her, as she was cleaning off the tables with another cloth, trying to get them to be fully clean and presentable for the normal crowd. To Gareth's eyes, she was absolutely radiant, even when doing such a menial task, like scrubbing a table. Her brown hair shone in the dim lit bar, further announcing her presence. She looked over to him, and shot him a look as if to tell him to 'quit his bloody daydreaming and get back to cleaning those beer mugs.' Gareth couldn't help but smile, and he could tell Jenna herself was hiding one back; it tugged at the sides of her cheeks, wanting to make an appearance. Jenna wouldn't let that happen, though. She was too stubborn of a person to let something like that get to her.

Next, the large man looked around the establishment that he called home. The bar itself was not large, but not cramped either. The bar counter was of old design, the wood still lacquered, but quickly showing age. The walls and floor

were made of wood, giving a 'log cabin' kind of experience to all those who walked in. On the walls were various posters advertising beer or the latest job postings, and some photos were mixed in as well. On the wall opposite to the bar, a dartboard hung; there were holes in the wall all around it from the drunken attempts to hit it by customers. But, all the darts had since turned up missing, so it hung as a silent reminder of days past. Among the seven tables scattered around the room, was a large billiards table which showed considerable wear, but still served as a great means of entertainment. Adjacent to the left of the bar was the door to outside, and on the wall behind the bar was the stairs leading up to the second floor, where everyone else resided. Finally, on the right of the bar, stood an odd sight. An oak grand piano stood in all its glory, its ivory keys shining in anticipation that they would soon be graced by a talented pianist. And that talented pianist sat right at it, on his stool, the whole time studying his sheet music.

Yes, this man was the best of Gareth's friends; they had known each other since they were very young. The pianist was shorter and smaller than Gareth, but was still almost as strong; yet his frame would've said he was weak. The young man's golden hair sat in an organized mess on top of his head, spiking out in as though its randomness was actually directed somehow. His clothes were not unlike Gareth's own, but rather his vest was a green color, and his weathered pants and shoes were a lighter shade of brown. However, the biggest standout feature of this man was his soulful sapphire eyes. Always they appeared to be on the verge of tears, but even then, his eyes were still easily lit with the sparkle of happiness when he could find it. This man, the one Gareth knew so well, was known as Isaac, the piano man.

Isaac's family's fate was similar to Gareth's, but rather his father was killed instead by an accident in the factory in

which he labored to provide for his wife and son. His mother became grieved after the loss of her husband, and she quickly grew weak. It wasn't hard for the influenza virus to end her suffering; it had done it to many people that year. Felix was quick with the invitation for residence; he too had known Isaac for many years. Since then, the young Isaac made his living playing the piano in the bar. It would've been heresy to say he hated playing the piano; the feelings he could stir within others were amazing proof of that. Many came to the Tavern over the other bars in town simply because of Isaac, and this maintained that their business would stay open.

The young pianist rose and stretched, still absently running chords through his mind, and he turned to hear the sounds of three pairs of feet coming down the stairs from above. The first to emerge was a tall man, raven haired with deep brown eyes. He too, wore the similar clothes of Garet. This man, known for both his kindness and his ability to drive a hard bargain, was called Felix. The other two were much shorter, and they both had blonde hair and sparkling purple eyes. However, there was one distinct difference between the two besides their names and clothes. One was male, and one was female; and they were referred to as Ivan and Sheba, respectively.

How Felix had managed to scrape enough money up for purchasing the establishment for them remained a mystery, but his sister ventured to guess it was Felix's rather persuasive nature that got him the place. Felix himself only smiled when asked about the issue, and Isaac had once made the joke of hoping Felix didn't kill anyone he knew. Of course, Felix wouldn't harm a hair on a fly's body, so long as it didn't try to hurt his friends or family. Though he could be harsh and tough, most of the time, Felix was a quiet and understanding character who really was contented with

owning this bar and seeing his sister get married to someone he could get along with.

Ivan and Sheba were the newest members of the group, and by far the youngest. They both never knew their families, only knowing the orphanage they grew up in. The life there was harsh and quite unforgiving, so the two young kids grew up rather quickly; both of them maturing enough to comprehend the world around them. About seven months before, the orphanage where they both met and were raised together burned down in a massive firestorm that engulfed almost two blocks of buildings. It was then that kindly old Felix met them in the street one day and immediately recognized their intelligence and potential, so he extended his hospitality to them. Ivan and Sheba were initially thinking to decline, but seeing no other options, accepted instead. Now they lived in a loving home where they found three older brothers and an older sister to reside with.

"The crowd hasn't come in yet?" Felix asked, breaking the long standing silence in the bar. Gareth shook his head.

"No, not yet, Felix. But. . . you know how the regulars are; they come in here night after night, week after week, just to get their nightly drink and to listen to everyone's favorite musician over there." Gareth said, half-jokingly.

"I'm not my own favorite musician, Gareth." Isaac replied. "So, I'm not really everyone's favorite musician." The Venus Adept thumbed through his sheet music again, searching for a particular song.

"Then who is, piano man?" Gareth returned, with a half-sarcastic grin. Isaac made no reply, save for an equally sarcastic grin, as he began playing out Fuer Elise on the

piano and stopped after the first chorus. "Thank you, mister wisenheimer." The Mars Adept sighed.

"Oh, stop picking on Isaac, Gareth." Jenna said to him. "At least he can play the piano and make it sound beautiful! Unlike someone in this room. . ." Gareth remembered the incident in question. The time he tried to play the piano he succeeded in making the alley cats yowl and nearly causing untold damage to the instrument itself. It was not a pretty spectacle, to say the least. Gareth grimaced with the memory, and this returned him to the point about Jenna's reason to make him happy. It was definitely the 'something completely different' at this moment in time. "As well, Isaac's a lot better looking than you!"

"Oh, that's not what you said when we were first engaged." Gareth smiled back.

"A girl reserves the right to change her mind about how her fiancée may look compared to another man, right Isaac?" Jenna turned to him.

"The piano man is NOT getting involved in this. I'm just the entertainment." He responded, grin tugging at his cheeks.

"I honestly don't know why I just don't get married to Isaac. At least he knows when to shut up and look cute." She smiled.

"Oh, you know you couldn't live without me, Jenna."

"Yeah, like she can't live without a hernia." Ivan joked.

"Well, people have called me a perpetual pain in the you know what before." Gareth laughed, giving a false "thinker" position all the while.

"That man was probably the wisest man on the face of the earth." Isaac sighed, resting his head in his hands.

"You should know Isaac! That man was you!" Gareth snapped back.

"Exactly." He laughed. It was rare Isaac was ever in this kind of mood. Generally he kept to himself and remained almost eerily quiet.

"Well, isn't somebody in the best of moods tonight?" Felix asked, seating himself at one of the barstools. "It's rare we ever see a smile from you anymore, Isaac."

"Yeah, you're usually about as happy as a drunkard without his tankard. This is a nice change, my friend." Ivan said, walking over and leaning against the piano. Isaac made no immediate reply, but when he did, he simply pointed to Ivan and spoke only a few words.

"I've told you before, lay off the ivory." Ivan immediately moved away from the piano, remembering Isaac absolutely hating anyone messing with his piano after Gareth manage to nearly destroy it in the past; once with the sad attempt at playing it, and the other was better to be left unmentioned. As Ivan backed off, several people began entering the bar through the front door. The employees and owner of the bar regarded each other with a silent nod, and Ivan and Sheba quickly made their way back upstairs while Felix and Gareth stood behind the counter. Jenna quickly moved next to the piano, where she took her usual seat to the right of Isaac. The crowd quickly piled in, and soon the bar was a center of soft murmurs, light chatter, and the sounds of a cue ball breaking the rack of billiards. Isaac sat wordlessly, watching the usuals play their game of pool, making their usual wagers on their usual shots.

"Isaac?" Jenna asked. He turned a moment later and established eye contact to acknowledge her inquiry. "Do you ever get tired of this life? I mean, it's the same drills in and out every day through every week of the year."

"No, I don't." He replied simply, answering the question more with his eyes than his words.

"Don't you think anything is missing?"

"As long as I have my heart, my health, and my piano, no."

"I see." Jenna sighed.

"And may I ask you one question, Jenna?"

"Certainly." Jenna said, astonished that the quiet one was willing to ask a question.

"Do you flirt with me just to get Gareth flustered, or do you really mean anything by it?"

"That's for me to know, Isaac." She smiled, coyly. Isaac's eyes showed some hint of laughter, while his expression remained largely unchanged. Isaac knew the answer to the question before he had even asked it. Jenna did flirt with him to make Gareth frustrated, but it was the truth that Isaac would've probably and unwittingly found himself the brother-in-law to Felix if Gareth wasn't around.

Isaac turned as he received a tap on his shoulder from the man sitting at the table closest to his piano. The Venus Adept shifted and turned around to meet the one who addressed him.

"Excuse me, Isaac. . ." A rather old man asked. "But could you play me a song? I don't remember the name, but it's sad

and beautiful and I know it by heart."

Isaac nodded. "I know which song you speak of, friend Kraden. I will play it for you." He cracked his fingers out and lifted the covering that protected the piano keys. As soon as he did, all commotion in the bar stopped immediately, save for the rolling 8-ball that inevitably caused a poor regular to lose his billiards match. Isaac began stroking the keys lightly, and a somber tune radiated throughout the bar. Moments later, Isaac began to sing with a voice unmatched in clarity, tone, and raw emotion. The bittersweet song itself was short, but it brought a tear to nearly every eye in the bar.

Immediately everyone in the bar began to applaud softly, but it had a meaning to it that was more than a thousand people clapping their loudest. Isaac didn't feel as though he deserved to take such applause, but he was obligated to by manners and custom, so he did. He glanced over to Jenna and saw her wiping tears from her eyes. Shortly after, the bar returned to its previous low murmur while Isaac awaited his next cue to play.

"No matter how many times you play that song, you get us all every time with it, Isaac." Jenna sniffed, looking over to see even her elder sibling holding back his emotion.

"Indeed. You are truly magnificent, Isaac." Kraden said, looking up from his gin and tonic. "You are blessed with both heart and skill. I would trade all my knowledge of Alchemy and the elements for that." Coming from Kraden, a foremost scholar of the science of Alchemy, this was saying a lot.

"Thanks, Kraden." Isaac replied. "I just play because I love to, I guess."

"That's the best kind of piano player!" Kraden said, pointing at him. "The one who does it for the love of doing it." Kraden reached into his pocket and flipped a nickel to him. Isaac stared at the nickel in disbelief. It was a lot of money for a single tip! "Just a little thank you from me, Isaac. You really have made this scholar's night."

"Think you can play something with a little bounce to it, piano man?" Another older man asked. "Oh, and ask that cute girl next to you if she needs a dance partner!" Jenna was up in a flash, almost immediately smacking him upside the head with her hand full force. Kraden shook his head slowly and chuckled.

"No matter how many times old Gil tries that, he never seems to get the point that he's destined to fail." Isaac didn't crack a smile as Kraden spoke, but his eyes once again gave him away. Jenna, after she had promptly shown old Gil how to drink a mug of beer through his nose, returned to her seat next to Isaac as he again lifted the covering on his piano keys and twiddled his fingers, unintentionally causing the bar to go once more into silence as he erupted into a more fast paced and lively tune, that made everyone smile with joy.

The sun rose up over the horizon and shone into the front window of the bar, while Isaac sat reading the morning newspaper, passively sipping a cup of tea. Jenna slowly emerged from the stairwell in her nightgown, looking as though she had just woken up.

"Morning, Jenna." Isaac said from behind his newspaper. "You're up early."

"Garet's stupid snoring kept me up half the night." Jenna sighed, sitting across from him, laying her head on the table.

"I lost count how many times I hit him with my pillow to get him to shut up, but. . ."

"It's like trying to stop the tides."

"Exactly. That's another reason I should be marrying you. At least you keep quiet, even when you're asleep." She smiled.

"You know you love him." Isaac smiled.

"I do." She sighed. "And that's what makes me want to kill the guy. It's because I can't do anything about it!"

"Sure you can. Just make his life a living nightmare until he does. That's what wives are supposed to do, right?" Isaac joked.

"Very funny." Jenna replied. It seemed as though she was the only person who could ever get Isaac to laugh or joke around anymore. She guessed it was because they had known each other for so long and they both knew each other's limits well enough. "This coming from the man most likely to stay a bachelor his whole life."

"I thought that was your brother."

"Okay, second most likely to stay a bachelor his whole life."

"There you go."

"So, what are you doing up this early, Isaac?" She asked, knowing it was far from unusual for the Venus Adept to be up at this early hour.

"I'm going to try to look for a day job. You know, maybe pull in some extra money for all of us? I mean, we don't exactly

have enough to pay for more than the bare essentials and the maintenance on this shop."

"I see. Isaac, you've been trying to do this for months now. Every day you've never been able to find a job for any of us. Don't you think you should just quit?"

"I can't." Isaac replied. "I'm part of this family too, so it's my responsibility to help in any way I can. That means going out to find a job." Isaac rose, and he put on a hat that matched his vest. "Wish me luck." He said as he walked out the door. "I'll be back before dinner!" Jenna sighed. Isaac wasn't the only one looking for jobs. Gareth and Ivan were always out and about looking for jobs too, but they had just as much luck as Isaac. She sighed softly, and headed back upstairs to bed, hoping that the male Mars Adept she bunked with had stopped sawing logs.

***Chapter 2*: Have You A Job Opening?**

The office was stuffy despite the cool temperature outside; many of the people within were already having sweat begin to bead on their foreheads. It was because of good old Murphy that the winds were blowing in the direction opposite of the windows, so no cooling breeze ever found its way within the room. In fact, the room was so still, a piece of paper abandoned on the floor did not move save for with the rustling of peoples' feet as they walked by. The office was mostly silent, save for the occasional chatter and the scratching of fountain pens on paperwork. Most of the said scratching came from one desk in particular. . .

There he sat, uniform clean and pressed, hammering away at his paperwork with his pen. The man seemed to have an unmatched diligence about him as he ran numbers and scenarios through his head quickly and efficiently. His broad arms were a pair one would be expected to be seen belonging to a factory worker, but this man was not your average laborer. His uniform was a dark blue, freshly tailored and amazingly crisp and vibrant compared to his comrades. It helped, of course, that it was new. The man's hair was quite long, and it shone a bright cerulean in the sun that glared in through the glass of a window. His eyes were as golden as what he wore on his chest: a badge.

His name was Picard, and he was a fresh recruit to the Tolbi Police Force's third precinct. He was a man of twenty one, and he had a youthful enthusiasm about him that no one else on the force seemed to have. This was only his first week on the job, and he was having the time of his life. Being a police officer had been his dream since he was old enough to talk. From the moment he completed his training,

he was dedicated to do the right thing and work hard to help the force be more productive. He was but a private, so he was pretty much stuck at a desk filling out misdemeanor reports, but it suited him just fine. His fellow officers always eyed him as though he was daft, but he didn't let their opinions stop him from doing his job. In fact, there was only one of his co-workers who seemed to share in any sort of passion for the job they were doing, and he was sitting at the desk across from him.

He resembled him closely, looking hardly different right down to their uniforms. But there were two distinct differences between the two of them. Picard's friend had blue eyes rather than gold, and the cause of his drive was different. Unbeknownst to Picard or anyone else on the force, this man secretly held a grudge against one of the city's most notorious crime lords; he had lost his sister to one of his men. His parents he could've cared less about; what with the way they treated him and his sister, but the loss of his closest relative was too much for the man known to everyone as Alex.

Alex was not the most talkative man alive, nor was he the nicest on most occasions. He was usually bitter cold about life, seeing nothing but the dark realities of what really existed in the world as they knew it. His blue eyes were always cold and usually equally as harsh. He didn't have any friends but one, nor did he want them. He figured anyone else getting close to him would be nothing more than a liability in the end. And liabilities that weren't necessary were unacceptable to the stone hearted Mercury Adept. The reason why he'd become friends with Picard was a mystery even to himself. Picard was almost his polar opposite; he came from a loving family, didn't have any problems with the mafia, and had a fairly wide-eyed view of the world. Alex

always thought someone like that would drive him madder than Jack the Ripper when he was without a soul to slay.

Right now, Alex had nothing more on his mind than three things. He still wanted revenge for his sister Ambi, he wanted to get his work done to keep Picard quiet, and he wanted to get out of the freaking building so he could get out of his stuffy uniform. Sweat was forming on his brow from the heat of the room and others around him, and Alex was not a man for warmth; he never had been. Sighing, he slipped another report into his out box and took one from his in box. This was the last one for the day, and then he would likely be assigned a beat for a couple of hours before he finally went off duty. He methodically wrote through the brief; it was regarding the theft of someone's wallet. It was an empty wallet, but it was a theft nonetheless, even as much as Alex hated filling out the paperwork for those kinds of things. Just as he finished, the captain of the precinct piled a stack of about twenty more misdemeanor reports into his inbox. After the captain had departed, Alex banged his head against his desk and silently swore to himself.

"I'm almost done, Alex. . . I can give you a hand with those if you want me to." Picard offered, taking his third to last report from his files. "I mean, I know how much you want to get out of here right now."

Alex didn't reply, but rather he shook his head and continued working with his pen carefully. The Mercury Adept silently wondered how much trouble he'd get into by shooting the captain with his revolver. He rebuked a moment later, realizing daydreaming wasn't going to get a darn thing done.

"Really, Alex. I can take those reports so you can walk the beat today if you want." Again, Alex made no verbal reply,

but rather pointed at him with the tip of his pen, and motioned 'get out there and walk the beat before I make you' gesture. Picard sighed, knowing better than to argue with him when he was in this kind of mood. Instead, Picard finished up his last three reports and signed out for walking his route; down 20th Street, to Tidewater Avenue, up to 6th Street, and back to the station, which was on 13th Street. It was a long route, but Picard only had to walk through once and assist any other officers on duty. So, the Mercury Adept picked up his trusty nightstick and made sure he had his revolver as he prepared to head out.

"See you later, Alex." Picard stated, walking past his desk.

"Yeah, later." Alex replied in one of his rare moments of speaking.

It was the same no matter where he went.

"Have you a job opening?"

"No, we have no jobs."

"Have you a job opening?"

"Yes, but we have someone else to do it instead of you."

"Have you a job opening?"

"Not for the likes of you."

"Have you a job opening?"

"No, and we never will."

"Have you a job opening?"

"Not for Adepts. If you were normal, then we could talk."

It was these kinds of encounters Isaac met with several times on a daily basis. No matter where he went, there were no opportunities for employment, and if there were, the person who was hired was usually willing to work for almost dirt. Isaac didn't demand a high wage, not by a long shot, but he demanded a wage that would help keep him and everyone else at the Tavern sustained at little more. Isaac had been to so many unemployment lines, rumored job openings, and whatever else he could find it made his stomach turn. Not even the factories were willing to hire him. It was a tough business, and it was even tougher because he was an Adept. Adepts were not persecuted like witches, but they weren't trusted by many employers who thought Adepts could be a threat to keeping wages low. Needless to say, this made Isaac's search entirely more difficult.

It grew to be almost two in the afternoon, and Isaac sat on a curb outside of the restaurant he offered to help clean up. Times were so tough, he didn't even have enough for lunch. His tips that he earned at his piano usually went straight to Felix, totally by Isaac's choice. Felix was by far the best money manager among the lot of them, and he always did his best with what he had. However, sustaining six people on the profit of the bar was risky at best. This is why finding a job was so important to Isaac; he wanted to be able to help them have some extra money. Isaac sighed as he stared at the pavement road below him.

"No luck today, Isaac?" Ivan asked, walking up to him. The Venus Adept shook his head shamefully.

"There has to be one damned job in this whole city, Ivan. There has to be." Isaac said, obviously frustrated at himself. "That's all I ask for." The young Jupiter Adept sighed. Right now he was on the same odyssey as Isaac, and he was having the exact results.

"We'll find something, it's just a matter of when." Ivan replied, sitting down, resting his head in his hands.

"Or if." Isaac sighed. His eyes were full of doubt, both of self and of others.

"You sure don't have much faith in people any more, do you?" Isaac didn't falter or change his expression in the least. "I don't suppose you have reason to either. I mean, how many people out there have shown real kindness to any of us besides Felix and Kraden?" Isaac removed his head from his hands and sat up straight. Even so, he still made no reply. "I mean, I know your parents made a lot of sacrifice for you. . . but since then, who else? I can see how you don't like people much, Isaac." Isaac regarded Ivan's comments carefully before he finally broke his silence.

"It's not that I hate people, Ivan. It's that I have no faith in them to do the right thing anymore." Perhaps this viewpoint was the most logical and true angle one could have, given the situation. No one hired for capability, rather for how low a wage they would work for, no one seemed to care for the greater good, and no one seemed to care that there were dozens dying each day from not having enough money to live on. Tolbi was certainly not the shining star of ethics and compassion in the vast space of Angara. Regardless, the effort could not be forsaken. He rose back to his feet and stretched. "I'm going to try a couple more places before I go back to the bar."

"Is this another test of your faith in people?" Ivan asked. Isaac frowned slightly. As smart as Ivan was, sometimes he was a little too smart for his own good. Isaac didn't think of his job searching as testing his faith directly, but. . . perhaps in the deep depths of his mind it was.

"Perhaps." Was Isaac's only response before he walked off slowly. He shoved his hands into his pockets and decided to try the factory on 12th and Main once more.

It was closer to five-thirty at night before Isaac finally got back to the Tavern. He tossed his hat back on the hat rack and immediately sat down at the bar and put his head down. Again, another day of failure and rejection by just about every employer in town. He made no sound at all until Jenna brought him his usual cup of tea after a long day. The Venus Adept looked up to his friend and gave a weak smile. To Jenna's eyes, it was a condition she saw everyone in. . . from the customers that ventured in and out of the bar, to Isaac and Ivan, even to Garet and Felix. They all would look depressed, some kind of hurt in their eyes, bags under their eyes.

Isaac took his tea and sipped it carefully. "Thank you, Jenna."

"Don't mention it." She said. She decided to avoid talking about how his job hunt went. It was the same story every night, so there was no point in it. Isaac must've caught the thought she had in mind as he started speaking.

"It was the same as usual. No one wants to hire a Venus Adept or any kind of Adept for that matter." Isaac sighed, shaking his head. He and Jenna remained silent until he finished his tea when he rose and walked over to his piano. He stretched out his fingers and began playing soft and

depressing tunes on his ivory keys. Eventually, Felix descended from above and pulled up a stool between the bar and the piano.

"Bad day, I'm guessing." He sighed.

"No worse than any of my others, no better." Isaac replied while still playing.

"I suppose it's been this way for all of us." Felix stated. "I'm sorry I can't do more for you, my friend." Isaac didn't reply, but Felix could tell that his friend didn't want to speak of it. Isaac was no doubt glad he was willing to help him, but he didn't want more. Another eerie silence settled in over the bar before the door swung open and two new strangers walked in. Felix quickly turned to greet potential new customers.

"Ah, early comers, huh? Well, all the same, thanks for dropping in! What can we get for you."

"A couple of beers." A man with blue hair and golden eyes replied. His friend had blue hair and blue eyes, and he seemed to resemble a tired and frustrated Isaac.

"Coming up." Felix replied, tapping them out quickly and handing the drinks to them.

"Thank you." The man with the golden eyes said, while his friend just nodded in gratitude. They sat at the bar and began to chat with Felix. "How is the business here, good sir?"

"All things considered, we do pretty well. Although I think we have a lot to thank our pianist for." He motioned to Isaac, who wasn't paying attention to the conversation at all. "And

what business are you two gentlemen in, if you don't mind my asking."

"We're police officers." The man said. "My name's Picard, and this is my partner, Alex." Alex nodded in a semi-formal greeting as he continued drinking wordlessly.

"Ah, and I'm Felix, the owner of this tavern. And that is my little sister Jenna," he said, pointing to where she was busy scrubbing off a tabletop. She looked up and waved with a smile. "And that over there is Isaac, our piano player. Isaac! Say hello to Picard and Alex." The Venus Adept looked up from studying his music and greeted them with something not unlike Alex's silent regard. "My soon to be brother-in-law isn't around right now, and neither are our two other helpers." He said. "They should be getting in any time now. So, how goes the work of the police?"

"Well, I'm new, and this is only my first week. Alex has been around for a couple of months before me, so he'd be the person to speak with. . . if he was a man of words, that is." Picard smiled. Alex sighed silently to himself. His partner was either a naïve idiot or he just liked trying to draw attention to him. In his own eyes, Alex thought Picard was a mix of the two, but yet he was the same kind of man the police force really needed, as much as he hated to admit it.

"Ah, Alex here sounds a lot like Isaac." Felix stated. Isaac and Alex exchanged a glance, and it took them less than an instant to realize that they were completely different people with completely different motives and drives. Isaac sensed a bitterness and a hatred within Alex, and Alex picked up the sense of being a loner and having distrust to most people from the pianist in the corner. "Got any requests for him? He'd be more than happy to play just about anything." Alex didn't show any interest, but Picard obviously seemed

interested as he sat thinking before he turned to Isaac a moment later.

"Do you know Beethoven's Fuer Elise?" He asked. Isaac's eyes noticeably brightened.

"Yeah, I do." He said, almost smiling as he began playing. Picard's visage found itself sprouting a grin as the piano player performed the song flawlessly and still maintaining the emotion that its composer meant for it to have. Even Alex was silently impressed with Isaac's ability, but he found no need to speak up. He figured Isaac already knew he was good, so he didn't feel the need to say something that had been said a thousand times before. As Isaac finished, Picard found himself clapping fully.

"That is probably the best rendition I've ever heard." Picard said. "It's not often someone can play my favorite song with such skill."

"It's your favorite too, huh?" Isaac asked, sliding away from his piano. "It's nice to find someone else who has an ear for the classics."

"It seems like they are dying tunes in this day. I thank you, Isaac." Picard rose, putting his money for the drink on the bar counter while flipping Isaac two cents. "We'd better be going, Alex. Thank you for everything, Felix. We will remember this place." The other Mercury Adept nodded while putting his own money on the table in front of him. He too, flipped Isaac a coin, a rare gesture from the cold Alex. Picard and Alex quickly departed.

"Well, you meet more interesting people every day, wouldn't you say, Isaac?" Felix turned to him.

"You could say that." Isaac quietly replied, holding his three cents in his palm. "Are we expecting much of a crowd tonight, Felix?"

"It's a Sunday, and last night was a little slower than usual. I wouldn't doubt we could get busy." The elder man sighed. It was obvious in his facial expression that he didn't really desire the traffic, save for the capital it would bring them for their necessities. He looked noticeably tired to Isaac's keen eyes, but the reason as to why still eluded the younger man. "You'd best get some rest, Isaac. Who knows how much you'll have to do tonight." Isaac nodded and turned back to his piano and was about to play before Felix spoke again. "I told you to get some rest, not play the piano." Isaac turned around and locked his eyes onto his friend and said simply:

"This is how I rest."

***Chapter 3*: Spirits**

It was a soft sound; barely audible to even the most silent of environments. This sound was an enigma in dead silence and a phantom in quiet still. It was a shadow in the noise, it was but a specter to the ear. Though the sound was enigmatic, it was undoubtedly a sound of sorrow, a resonance of despair. While it was in no more than a single fleeting moment, it said everything at once.

The mysterious tone, was that of a single tear hitting the soft and carpeted floor beneath her. Her eyes were red with sadness, and the tears flowed freely from within. Her face was thin and beautiful, eyes as blue as the sea. Her hair was almost the same color, pulled back into a ponytail with a fancy hair band. She wore a cobalt blue dress with matching shoes and earrings; it was obvious to any viewer that she was not of working class. Even through her immense sorrow, she was still attractive. Her name, Mia.

At least, that was the name that Alex wrote down in his notepad as he took her story down. It was apparent that her father had passed away the night before, and the cause of death was yet unknown. This was the first time Alex was on a case like this, and it felt odd taking questions when he hardly ever spoke himself. Nevertheless, Alex knew it was his job and did it anyway. Mia was obviously broken up about the loss; not surprising. What did startle Alex was a passing resemblance he saw in her of his younger sister. Perhaps that was why Alex was willing to ask questions as well.

Among the information he picked up was the fact that Mia's father had been the owner of a major steel producing factory; big business in the high classes of Tolbi. He was rich

and well off, but Mia was his only offspring and his wife had disappeared long ago. According to Mia, she had just up and left them both one night. The police officer wasn't much for back stories anyway. What Mia was saying meant little to him personally, but he made sure to note what she said carefully in a small notebook.

"When was the last time you saw your father alive?" Alex asked, in his normal tone, which was stone cold and serious.

"Last night, just after dinner. Father said he was going to bed early because he wasn't feeling well. I said good night to him and I turned in as well. When the morning came, I found him. . ." Her voice broke and tears began flowing from her eyes again. Alex sighed inwardly. He wasn't going to get anything out of her at this rate. Then again, he considered the circumstances and certainly didn't blame her. "dead." She finished finally. The officer nodded.

"Was there anyone who had a grudge against your father, miss Mia?" Alex inquired in the same voice.

"Not that I know of, officer. My father. . ." She sniffed. "Was a good man." Again, Alex gave the stern nod.

"Thank you for your time, miss." He said, looking over his shoulder at other officers removing the body from the residence. He turned and prepared to leave, but even then something caught itself in the depths of Alex's conscience and he turned around. "Take care." Was all he said as he turned back and walked out.

Picard, who was helping with the body, stood agape at the entire scene. He knew police work was not going to be easy business, but this was almost too much for him. Seeing the man, lifeless yet peaceful, left an impression on him. Seeing the man's daughter so distraught also made him feel

depressed. He wasn't expecting his first case to be something shaping up like a murder. Nonetheless, this environment did nothing but strengthen his silent resolve from within to do well. It strengthened because he wanted to help both the man and his daughter find some solstice in life. He shifted his weight as he ran off to catch up with Alex.

With the last officer, a man resembling the man who questioned her, leaving, Mia walked over and shut and bolted the front door of her abode. It was not a house, but rather an apartment on such a scale. The walls were painted a soft blue color; almost matching the hair on her head. The decor was lavish and rich, something you'd expect from the middle class. The apartment she lived in was not huge necessarily, but it was far bigger than any of the rooms or apartments the working class lived in. She walked into the main sitting room and seated herself on a beige overstuffed chair and continued to weep strongly. She had loved her father very much, there was no doubt about that. The thought of living on alone without him was overwhelming.

The room about her was so empty feeling it felt haunted. Though the room had a coffee table in front of the chair in which she sat, several bookcases and a ticking cuckoo clock on the wall above the carefully carved fireplace mantle, it still seemed to be filled with emptiness. The oil paintings on the walls seemed to watch Mia with a strange curiosity; both with a sort of eerie sadness and an even more disturbing look of quasi- contempt.

Once again, the enigmas and phantoms of sounds coursed through the room, melding only with the sobs of the girl creating them. After awhile, she looked up and studied the room about her. It had bookcases and tables with all sorts of little luxuries around, but she scoffed at it all. What good was it anymore? What good were any of these material

possessions if one couldn't enjoy them? Nothing seemed to have a purpose anymore to her. With no father, no one to love or care for, what good would secular joy bring her? None. She was even disgusted at the dress she wore. It was beautiful, certainly, but it was just another thing. Another luxury. . . and another reminder. She continued to weep after that, letting the tones of despair echo through the now otherwise empty apartment. She rose and walked into her own room, stumbling over her own feet on her way in, but instead of allowing herself to catch her own balance, she allowed herself to fall onto her own bed, where she allowed her tears to soak the soft fabric on her pillowcase. Here she remained for many minutes, hours.

Her reddened eyes snapped open suddenly, realizing she had drifted into a soft and restless sleep. She sat forward in her bed, her eyes completely dry and tired. Mia cupped a hand to her forehead as she tried to gather what rational thought she had left. Many moments passed before she finally realized: she needed to get out and get air. She nodded once in resolution to herself and stood on wobbly legs. Unsure if her legs would support her, she leaned against her nightstand, supporting her weight while trying to build inner strength. She finally mustered enough moments later and stood up. She decided in a moment's time to change into something a little more plain before venturing out.

Jenna sighed to herself as she turned the page in her novel. It was the umpteenth time she read it, and she would likely read it umpteen more times. This was life; you had to treasure what you had, and this novel was one of the few

things Jenna owned for herself, and she was more than obliged to make good use of it. And yet, in its opening passage, it said an infinite amount; both for the time it represented and the time that was now. Jenna smiled as she read the opening lines of the book to herself once more:

"Perhaps there was an age when people understood one another. Perhaps there was an age when understanding was commonplace and common law rather than a seemingly meaningless insert into the chaotic monotony of society. Although men are considered social, are they truly? Man slaughters one another for the sake of land, in the name of a divine spirit, or just because they can. Is it not the true nature of a society to come together as one to aid for the common good? Perhaps there was that age, many eons ago, but in the burning daylight hours of mankind's stupidity, there is no such thing. Unity is deemed for the fools, and the fools never live long. They are either shot by the self-proclaimed wise, or they are destined to fail with mankind's stupidity hanging about their heads. The 'wise' are no better. In fact, they are worse off than the fools. They believe society is fine the way it exists, but there is no society to speak of. Not when every man on the streets is fending for only himself and his loved ones. . ."

Jenna sighed again as she closed the book. The author's sharp tongue was a little too much to read now; not when she thought about Gareth looking so hard for work to help support everyone. Though the argument was about society, she knew it hit too close to home for her. The Mars Adept stood behind the bar, the closed book on the wooden surface in front of her. She put her head down on the book and let herself fall into deep thought.

Perhaps there WAS an age when people understood one another. Whatever age that was, it must have been the

golden age of humanity. A Utopia. Perhaps the age never did exist, and perhaps such a thought was for the fools to consider. Whichever the case, Jenna pondered to herself secretly the writings of this author and lost herself. The story was certainly not an accurate historical reference of any kind, but rather a story that took place a hundred years before their present time, and it was thought-provoking to say the least. At last, she picked her head up and decided to continue reading.

"There is little a single fool can do to change anything. Only an army of fools can produce enough wisdom to move anywhere close to a society. How can fools produce wisdom? Ah, this is how the universe works in the strangest of ways. The wise are never the ones to make change, for they fear it. The fools are the ones ready to change, and change is inevitable. Perhaps the fools are not so foolish and perhaps the wise are not so wise. Perhaps it is the other way around. However, our ancestor's legacy is in the answer and it is not the place of any man, fool or wise, to make a firm statement one way or the other.

Is it the wise, the ones who oppose the change, who pay the price when change happens to touch them like the finger of the angel of Death? Never. The wise remain unharmed and usually affected in only a good way by the pass of change. The fools never seem to find the solace in the change and are usually the ones receiving the reality end of it. The fools are the men trampled in the stampede and wave; it is the fools injured by the sudden strike; it is the fools who sit dumbfounded, pondering how the wise benefit and how they must continue to seek the very thing that smacks them in the visage every time alongside cold, hard, reality."

Jenna stood back for a moment. No matter how many times she read this, it always seemed to mystify her into deep

thought every time. She rested her head into one of her slender hands and let the gears turn inside her head. It was not so much trying to understand what the man was saying, but rather to comprehend the world itself. The sheer amount of thought here was amazing, and the amount of thinking she had already done would astonish even her fiancée and older brother. Jenna was indeed a brilliant woman, but she didn't want to always let it show. It was always more fun to let the men of the universities jabber about moot points while thinking her a complete airhead, and then her coming out with the perfect refute point. She stunned many a man that way, and that's how Kraden actually became a regular to the Tavern. Jenna's brown eyes looked up as the front door of the Tavern opened and a stranger walked in. She closed her book instantly and looked up.

The stranger walking in was a strikingly attractive girl about her own age, with flowing blue hair pulled up into a ponytail. She moved much like many did, a hidden expression of sorrow beneath her fair skin. The young woman pulled up a stool at the bar and remained silent. She was wearing a plain white blouse with a dark blue dress; certainly not an unusual combination, but there seemed something different about her than most women.

"Hello, may I get you anything?" Jenna asked, with a smile. The woman didn't respond right away, but as Jenna prepared to speak again, she turned.

"Huh? Oh, nothing, thanks." She half-smiled with a sigh. Jenna's mind instantly went skeptical.

"You look as though something is troubling you. You seem highly distracted. If there's something the matter, don't hesitate to talk. There's no trouble here." She said, keeping a smile. The woman looked back at her and remained silent

for a few moments. "Tell you what? How about I make you some tea? On the house." She asked.

"Thank you kindly." The woman replied. Jenna nodded and began preparing the tea behind the bar.

"By the way, my name is Jenna, miss. . ."

"Mia."

"Right, Mia."

"And. . . you were right about my being troubled. Not. . . many things have gone well as of late."

"Care to talk about it?"

"Yes." She said, as Jenna handed her a cup of hot tea. She sipped it carefully, and quickly discovered it wasn't the same quality she was used to, but given the fact she was in a different neighborhood than the one she normally dwelled, it didn't bother her. The tea, however, was still good. "Well, miss Jenna. . . my father died last night." Jenna's expression darkened.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know." Jenna apologized.

"Don't apologize for something you couldn't have known." Mia replied; her voice wasn't sharp or harsh, but she still conveyed a sense of order to it. "The police are not sure what he died of." She sighed. "And I think my father had other troubles that he never told me about. I just have no idea what they are."

"I see."

"You seem to know your way about troubles, miss Jenna. Have you had many?"

"Please, it's just Jenna." She said, the smile fading away from her face. "Yes, I do know trouble, and I know it well. However, I also do know great joy. My troubles come from the fact that we can barely produce enough to support ourselves; that and remembering my parents dying of influenza and pneumonia. They worked so hard to keep me and my brother well and they ended up weakening themselves in the process. I remember that my father would always give more food to my brother and me than he would take for himself. My mother was much the same way. She gave us the best water while she and my father will willing to drink water far less clean. . . not that ours was very clean to begin with. They did so much for us and sacrificed everything too. . . I truly understand your loss, miss Mia."

"If I call you Jenna, you must call me Mia." She said. "So. . . we aren't unlike." Mia sighed. "My father was the same way to me. Always wanted the best for me no matter what it took." She smiled weakly as she looked around the bar. "This is a nice place." She said, considering that most bars in the city were dives and were not half as clean.

"Thanks. My brother owns this bar and me makes sure everything and everything is kept in order."

"Pardon me for bouncing back and forth, but you also mentioned you knew great joy. What did you mean?"

Jenna smiled. "Well, I've got the greatest older brother in the world. He's so kind and compassionate; he reminds me of father. I'm engaged to a wonderful but sometimes dunderheaded headed oaf whom I love with all my heart. And I live with the greatest friends one could ever know."

"Really? Sounds nice." Mia replied. She never knew any of those things. She had no siblings to lean on, she had no one she could say who she loved, let alone liked, and she had no real friends. The only people she knew were the people that her father did business with, and she would hardly put herself in that arena. Mia was in fact, alone most of the time. Her father was the only person she really felt comfortable around and therefore helped forge her personality into a reserved and quiet one. She had already told Jenna much more than she had said to anyone else, mostly because she felt a strange aura of trust about her and the very tavern she sat in. As the thoughts ran through Mia's head, she considered why she even decided to set foot in this bar. It struck her a moment later. She remembered one of her father's business friends saying this bar was great for forgetting about troubles; mostly because the skill of the piano player. She studied the bar again and took note of the piano, but also noticed the photographs on the wall behind her. She rose slowly and walked over to them and began looking. The one that caught her eye was a simple monochrome picture of the front of the bar, where a total of half a dozen people stood.

Each person stood side to side, in no particular order. On the far left was a girl, fair haired and obviously younger than Jenna. She looked wise and yet still having a youthful charge about her. Next on the left was a boy who looked noticeably similar, with roughly the same hair color. He had an instant look of intelligence beaming in his bright eyes, yet that same enthusiasm seemed to emanate a sorrow of sorts. The man next to him was raven-haired, and he was tied for being the tallest person in the photo. His facial expression was calm and relaxing, and his eyes were kind and inviting. The slight smile he wore on his face conflicted with itself; it showed a sort of somber happiness that was unusual, even

for happiness' sake. The next in line was Jenna, who shared an uncanny resemblance to the previous person. Mia assumed that the tall, raven haired man was her brother. To the right of Jenna stood a man as tall as her brother, but with an odd color hair that stood straight up on end. He was big and obviously strong, but he truly looked as gentle as a tiny field mouse. His grin showed he could smile through any hardship and endure any trial. He looked like a person who could stay truly happy with what he had and didn't need anything else. The last person, however, appeared as an enigma to her. The last person in the photo was a young man, a few inches shorter than the previous man with erratic light hair. His eyes were deep and soulful, yet. . . they revealed nothing about him. His expression was totally objective, and nothing more could be found from him.

"I see you've met our family." Jenna smiled, walking up to her. "There's Sheba, and that's Ivan." She said, pointing from left to right. "That's my big brother, Felix, the guy next to me there is my fiancée, Garet, and the man on the end is our piano player, Isaac."

"So he's the piano player I heard about once." She said, almost surprised such a seemingly faceless person could do such a thing.

"Oh yes. . . he is really amazing. You should come to hear him play some day. You'll understand why everyone says he's the best."

"What is everyone like?"

"Well, Ivan and Sheba are so similar it can be kind of scary. They're both extremely smart and both are pretty quiet most of the time. It's like they don't have to communicate with words to one another, like they always know what the other

is thinking. Felix there is a very kind man. He's the reason why everyone lives here. He went out of his way to help people in need, and that's why he takes pride in running this bar. . . he gives a safe haven to people who normally don't have one. Garet. . . well, I could go on for hours about the big lug. He's really sweet and do anything for his friends. And Isaac. . . he's very quiet and very reserved. Strange that he produces such incredible songs that always bring a smile to the faces out of the people or a tear to the same people's eyes and never smiles himself."

"He never smiles?"

"Rarely. It is like he's perpetually in a state of depression."

"Why is that?"

"I'm not sure. I think it's because he doesn't feel like he does enough for everyone. He has been unable to find a job after countless months trying his hardest." Mia nodded slowly.

"I should like to meet the rest of your family someday. Perhaps I will come back soon."

"And maybe you'll be lucky enough to hear Isaac play his piano."

"That would be very nice. I look forward to it." She said, finishing the last of her tea. "Thank you so very much for your kindness, Jenna. I hope we shall meet again soon." She said, preparing to leave.

"It was great to meet you too, Mia. Please. . . come back any time. Our door's always open." She smiled. Mia replied with a nod and a smile, as she exited the bar, leaving Jenna alone once more with her book.

It was some hours later before Isaac returned to the bar. Everyone else had been home for two hours, and they were all at their places prepping for the coming evening rush. Isaac hung his cap on the hat rack and leaned against his piano. His trademark bags under his eyes were more obvious than usual tonight. Garet walked up to him and pointed the obvious fact out. Isaac didn't reply but with a sharp glare, giving the impression he didn't want to hear about it. The Venus Adept sat on the stool in front of his piano and laid his head down on the covering of the keys. Soon after, Jenna leaned against Isaac's piano, and his head promptly lifted.

"Yes, Jenna?" He asked.

"You know, I want to know something. Why don't you smile more?"

"I have no reason to." Isaac replied, his eyes as usual, doing more talking.

"It wouldn't hurt you to show a little emotion now and then."

"Again, I don't have a reason to." Jenna sighed and decided to drop the argument. She was never going to get anywhere with it anyway.

"We had a new visitor into the bar this afternoon while you were out." Jenna began.

"What, another down on his luck high-rolling stock broker?" Isaac asked, coldly.

"No. Actually it was a woman." Isaac made no reply, nor did he look in the least surprised. He also didn't look like he particularly cared. "She was a really nice girl, too. Soft

spoken, quiet, and pretty shy. I'd say she was your type, Isaac." She said. "She was cute too. I think you two would get along well."

"I've no interest in romance, Jenna." He replied. "It's just another thing to get in the way and another mouth to feed, and I'm still without a job. Besides, no one comes into this bar without some sort of reason. What was hers?" Isaac was in an unusually bad mood tonight. While his tone was even, steady, and far from angry sounding, Jenna had learn to pick up the subtleties of Isaac's personality. She was sure that he had a terrible day and was likely rejected far less kindly than he should've been. Jenna's expression darkened as she continued.

"Her father died last night, Isaac. He was the only family she had, and from the sounds of her grief, she doesn't have many friends to speak of." She replied. Isaac's eyes changed from being cobalt ice into pools of cobalt blue sea. It was plain as day to even the blindest of men that the pianist had regretted his attitude towards someone he was yet to meet.

"That's terrible." Isaac said, his eyes appearing to be watering, but his tone still neutral. "I hope all goes well for her, then."

"Well, she said one day she may come back. She also wants to hear you play."

"Then I shall play my piano for her when we meet."

Jenna's face lit up somewhat before she gave her final response. "Good."

***Chapter 4*: Unorthodox Ways**

Garet frowned as he sipped his tea. The bartender was sitting in a stool that he would inevitably be servicing had it been nighttime. He made himself idle against the bar as he read the morning newspaper. The same old news ran across its flimsy pages. There were the same old editorials and the same old stories about the economy, the growing civil disorder and discontent in Hesperia, the government, organized crime, police incompetence. . . nothing really peaked his interest, but he decided at random to pick a story to read, and that is exactly what he did.

"Local Factory Owner Perishes In Sleep. by: Dargon Jones, Tolbi Sun staff writer.

TOLBI- April 10th. One of Tolbi's many factory owners passed away in his sleep last night. He was found by his sole direct relative, his daughter. At her request, their names have been withheld for the sake of privacy. It was said that the deceased was rumored to be on shaky financial grounds, possibly with misreported profits or miscalculations in the bank books. However, these rumors are not substantiated and that his steel factory's bank books are currently sealed pending his death until the company is placed under new management. His sole survivor has not confirmed whether she will take over the textile factory, but it is reasoned to believe she will resume business as usual as soon as all the deceased's affairs are in complete order."

Garet sighed as he put aside the paper. He had been lucky enough to receive enough education to read when he was young, much like Isaac. The factories in which their fathers worked were required by law to provide elementary education to the children of the workers, so Garet and Isaac

both caught a lucky break. Jenna had been able to do the same thing, but the most amusing thing about it was that she refused to be put in the class with girls and demanded that she be given the same education as the boys.

Eventually, the instructor gave in and allowed Jenna in the very same class the two other Adepts were. Yes, Jenna had been that stubborn since she was young, and that's perhaps one of the reasons why Gareth adored her so much. Then again, that same stubborn attitude was the same thing that gave the male Mars Adept headache after headache.

"Anything good in the news today, dear?" Jenna asked, pulling up a seat as close as she could get to Gareth. She leaned onto him, resting herself on his muscular arm. Her tone was soft and loving; an occurrence that only happened when they were alone together.

"There never is." Gareth sighed. "Only more grief. I don't even know why I read the paper anymore." The Mars Adept had been correct. Nothing ever good came of the papers; after all, good news was never profitable. Bad news is what sold papers, and therefore the papers preyed on the misfortunes of others to survive, much like a thief. However, newspapers, unlike thieves, never got their divine retribution; there was no law against what they did, yet they made some feel horrible about themselves and made the others glad they weren't the prey.

"Well, times could always be worse, my dear Gareth." She said, softly.

"I suppose you're correct." He replied. The Mars Adept looked into his fiancée's deep eyes. Within them, Gareth found some kind of strange respite that he found nowhere else. She always made him feel as though he was something

right; like no matter what he did, she'd be with him through everything.

"I'm always right." She smiled, a mild joy coming to her eyes. "You've known that since the day we met."

"And you've never let me forget it." He replied.

"What are you doing today, Gareth?" She asked a few moments later.

"The same thing I do everyday: Go out and look for a job. . . no matter how many times I get rejected, I can't give up."

"You sound a lot like Isaac."

"Well, his stubbornness probably rubbed off to me." He replied, not really knowing how right he was. Isaac's attitude toward finding a job had a strange sort of effect on every other male in the bar. Gareth, Felix, and even Ivan found themselves compelled to try to find something, anything at all. This determination, albeit how grim it was, seemed to help give purpose to the lives of the men in the Golden Sun Tavern. "It's time for me to go, Jenna. I will be back tonight." He said, rising. He pulled Jenna into an embrace. "I love you, dear. Stay out of trouble."

"I always do." She said, rising to kiss him on the cheek. "And I love you. Now get going. Time waits for no person, and neither does a job opening." Jenna said, pulling free, shuffling him out the door.

"See you tonight then!" He said, dashing off into the street.

The only sound that cut into the silence of the office was the soft rustling of papers. There were eleven people seated at an old wooden table, which had seen many years and many such meetings. The room in which this table sat in was lit by two hanging chandeliers. However, the neither light nor the chandeliers were elegant or attractive in any sort of way. Both only permeated the room with a sort of somber melancholy that was all too common these days. There were eleven people basking in this illumination, and their moods were no better than the lighting. At the head of the table sat an elder gentleman, the one breaking the silence with his careful shuffling in front of him. In the room with him sat nine other men and the last remaining body was an oddity at these kinds of meetings. The last was a woman, and she sat next to the man at the head of the table on the right.

Mia was doing her best to keep an even face. Given the fact that she was at the reading of the last will and testament of her only loved one, the task was daunting at best. The other men in the room did much the same, but their looks were considerably more businesslike than Mia's. Mia recognized some of their faces, mostly from the occasional business meeting they had at her father's apartment. Some were kind to her on these visits, but most were merely indifferent to her. Businessmen didn't mix well with kids most of the time. Mia looked at the lawyer who sipped at a glass of water thinly before he began speaking.

"I will now commence the reading of the will. You people were the chosen few the deceased allowed at this event. I will run through the will as thoroughly as possible."

"I, James Thaddeus Calvin, being of both sound mind and sound health, do write this, my last will and testament. In

the event of my death, I wish this document to only be read to the few people I trust most. Of which, these people are Mr. Lansing, the lawyer who should be reading you all this document, Mr. Morris, the my greatest advisor, Mr. Arkan, the vice president of Calvin Steel, Mr. Babi, the chairmen of the board of Calvin Steel, Professor Lichtenstein, my trusted friend and colleague in business from Tolbi University, Mr. Klein, director of production at Calvin Steel, Mr. Finch, the company attorney, Mr. Jacobson, the accountant of my firm, Dr. Kraden from Tolbi University and his assistant, Mr. Sarten, and finally my only daughter, Mia Calvin.

There was a time in life I was just an ordinary man setting out to live the dream of every man alive: Be successful. When I graduated Tolbi University I never knew how much that dream would come true. Through force of will and perseverance, as well as from an amazing amount of support from my friends, Professor Lichtenstein and Dr. Kraden, as well as my new found partner Mr. Arkan, I was able to found one of the most successful factories in all of Tolbi. I never dreamed when I was young that I would be able to do that. The first thing I'd like to do here and now is to give my eternal gratitude to my three best friends. Thank you for everything you have done for me and I hope you will do the same for the next president of Calvin Steel.

After the factory was set up, I also found allies in Mr. Klein, Mr. Finch, and Mr. Jacobson who always did their very best to ensure the security of the company. They have gone above and beyond what most employers would expect, and I'm proud to have had them in my employ. You three are an inspiration to the other employees and I wish you all well.

I'd also like to mention Mr. Morris and Mr. Babi, and thank them for their services. Morris helped to guide me through some of the toughest business decisions I've ever had to

make and made sure the result was favorable if not always as profitable as the alternative. Sometimes the way to success isn't always the way that makes the most money, and I'm glad that Mr. Morris realized this. On a similar note, I'd like to thank chairman Babi for all of his support, both as an advisor and as a great capitalist.

This leaves me with my only daughter, Mia. No matter what the circumstances, she has always been by my side, especially since my wife disappeared. She is headstrong, very intelligent, and has always had a fine heart. She has always been an inspiration to me, and through life with her I've learned more than any college or university could teach me. Thank you, my dear daughter.

Now that I've prattled on about friends and family for long enough, I will now make the purpose of this document clear. No doubt the interests and future of Calvin Steel remain at hand since my demise. Obviously the company is in need of new management since my . . . resignation. It has taken me many hours and several sleepless nights to come up with this decision as of the writing of this document. There were countless factors to consider in this thought. I, James T. Calvin, have decided to leave Calvin Steel's president's position to Mia Calvin, my daughter. As well, I leave my controlling interest in stock of my company to her. I understand that this gesture seems ludicrous, but Dr. Kraden and Professor Lichtenstein have both taught me to follow my instinct and Mia has taught me to follow my heart. Both say Mia is the right choice. My last request to all of you is to treat Mia with the same respect and friendship that you have shown me.

-James Thaddeus Calvin October 12th, 1922 AGS"

The lawyer cleared his throat before continuing. "That was quite an unorthodox method of constructing a will." Most of the room was dead silent in pure shock. It was completely unheard of to place a woman in such a high position in such a successful company. It was always considered a man's job to run things, and James Calvin didn't seem like one who would break from such a commonplace. Although Calvin was always a little different than most of the factory owners in the city, no one thought he would be capable of taking such an outrageous leap of faith. Even Kraden and Lichtenstein, whom knew Calvin so well, sat completely dumbfounded in their seats. Even Kraden's twenty year old assistant sat genuinely confused at the whole state of events.

However, no one was more surprised and shocked than Mia herself. Words could not begin to describe the immense range of emotions that she felt at this point. Her father trusted her so much that he was ready to hand his life's work over to her with so much as a single flick of a pen. He did this even knowing how society was and he was also certain that the appointment would work out perfectly fine. Even with these thoughts, other thoughts entered Mia's mind. She had never been trained for any sort of position and she therefore thought she was unfit to take the occupation.

"Mr. Lansing, are you sure that you read that correctly? I don't think I was meant to take the corporation over." Mia managed to say without allowing the lump in her throat to crack her voice.

"I read it word for word. It is obvious what his intentions were, my dear girl." Lansing replied to her, in a voice that still sounded amazed.

"It's no mistake." Kraden said shakily, but with an odd certainty in his older voice. "Whenever I corresponded with Mr. Calvin, he always spoke of how bright and how amazing his daughter was. He had once told me that he would like nothing more than her to follow in his footsteps. Of course, at the time, I dismissed this as fatherly pride; however, it is now clear that he had every intention of letting his daughter undertake this odyssey." Silence ensued for a brief moment.

"But I don't have any real training for this kind of undertaking!" Mia replied, almost unable to keep her wild emotions at bay.

"That is nonsense." Mr. Morris replied. "Your father has faith in you, and. . . I believe you might be able to do the job with some proper instruction. My knowledge of the company and business is at your disposal, Ms. Calvin."

"I must object." Jacobson interjected. "It is completely insane and not to mention incredibly foolish to make such a crazy jump into the open like this. Women weren't meant to run firms and with all due respect to Ms. Calvin, they wouldn't have the competence to do so!" Mia made no reaction; still in shock from the news, trying to regain control of her own thoughts before absorbing new ones.

"Are you calling Ms. Calvin's abilities into question, Mr. Jacobson?" Lichtenstein asked. "I doubt very much that the late Mr. Calvin would appreciate that gesture."

"Don't you try to lecture me, professor! I'm not one of your inane students!" Jacobson snapped. Professor Lichtenstein raised a bushy white eyebrow to this comment.

"Ah, but they are not so inane that they cannot accept a change. They obviously have a leg up on you there, sir." He commented with a light and level tone.

"You insult me? A lowly college professor? Hah. Mr. Arkan, you agree with me, do you not?"

Arkan folded his arms and regarded the arguments briefly. "I've no opinion on this situation."

"What?!" Jacobson, rushes of red flowing to his face. "Mr. Klein, Mr. Finch, Mr. Babi? Does anyone here agree with me?"

"I do." Klein replied. "Although it is not because I think that Mia is incapable. She is indeed a clever and resourceful woman, but the fact of the matter is really what would people say when they heard Calvin Steel was being run by a woman? We would be the biggest laughing stock in all of Tolbi. Our business would inexorably fail and we would all be sitting out in the streets in unemployment lines. I don't know about you gentlemen, but I do not want to see everything Mr. Calvin worked hard for go down the drain."

"'Inexorably fail?' Please, Mr. Klein. If there's one thing we've learned is that if we put out a quality product, people will buy." Morris replied.

"Like I said, I have no doubt Mia could do a fine job, but it's a matter of our image." Klein stated again.

"Image." Kraden scoffed. "Image. If image was everything, we would still be sitting around with clubs bashing each other over the head because the other guy has a better looking mate." Kraden's assistant chuckled at this quietly.

"I have to wonder about Mia's competence at the current time." Finch remarked. "She's obviously still in shock that her father's dead and isn't going to be thinking straight any time soon. Grieving over a loved one takes a very long time, especially considering how close they were to each other."

"But, isn't it obvious that James would've known this? He never was the careless type." Sarten, Kraden's assistant, remarked. "If anything, I'd say he was the most meticulous of the lot of us."

"Be quiet on matters you don't understand, boy." Jacobson turned to Sarten.

"I think he understands the situation perfectly." Lichtenstein said. "This therefore makes him unlike one man at this table."

Jacobson rose from his seat. "Are you insulting my integrity, sir?"

"I couldn't insult something that doesn't exist." The professor said with a slight smile tugging at his cheeks.

"Mr. Jacobson, please sit down." Mr. Babi said. "You're getting angry over a few well placed words from a college professor. You understand that you have little chance against a man of Professor Lichtenstein's caliber. However, I do agree with you. I do not think Mia should take over the company. Not without the consent of the board of directors and the shareholders. It wouldn't be fair to the rest of the company."

"Mr. Babi, did you forget that Mr. Calvin has a controlling share of the company? He owned 51% of the stock in Calvin Steel, making the majority of the company his own. This means he had the right to make his own changes at will, and passing control of both his shares and his control down to his daughter are perfect legal recourse. Mia does own Calvin Steel now." Lansing said. "It's official with the reading of this document."

"That doesn't change the fact that she's incompetent!" Jacobson shouted. His mouth was as loud as a cannon in the silence of a meadow and his shot was stinging.

"That's enough!" Mia leapt up from her chair, knocking it over backwards. The new conversation had finally penetrated the depths of her conscious mind and naturally, she wasn't at all pleased. "I won't sit here and let you call me incompetent or incapable any longer! Mr. Jacobson, if you have a problem with my management then resign your commission! Otherwise, shut your mouth and deal with it! I'll have you all know that I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself in a business affair and I'll prove it to all of you. I will see you in the office first thing Monday morning. Good afternoon, gentlemen." She said, venom in her tongue and fire in her eyes. She whirled around and stormed out of the office.

"Well, she inherited her father's obstinacy, that's for sure." Kraden chuckled.

A certain sort of calling brought her there. A strange and unexplained magnetism that drew her to the place where all problems seemed to find some sort of solace be it temporary or not. Again she found herself standing at the door to the tavern she had visited about two weeks ago now, the same place where a total stranger was more than willing to listen and offer hospitality. The hour was late, and from the looks of it, the tavern was all but empty, save for a few people at the bar and the people manning it. With a sigh, Mia Calvin slipped through the door. Immediately she was befallen with a greeting.

"Good evening miss! You're out late. Is there anything we can do for you?" The raven haired man at the bar asked. Mia hesitated to reply, but before she could, another voice, this time more familiar, rang out.

"Mia! Nice to see you again!" Jenna's voice rang out. Jenna immediately jumped from her chair beside the piano and walked over. "Did you come back to hear Isaac play?"

"Yes." Mia replied, half truthfully. In reality, she had come to the tavern for no known reason save to escape from the rigors she had been put through in the day.

"Ah, so you're the young woman my sister spoke of a couple of weeks ago, then." Felix smiled, warmth in his heart and care in his eyes.

"You're in for a treat when Isaac comes back downstairs. He's just on a little bit of a break while he gets some more of his music." Jenna turned to the visitor.

"And how long is he gonna be, my dear Jenna?" An older voice shot out.

"Gil, you call me 'my dear Jenna' once more and you will be finding yourself pulling that beer mug out of your head through your ears!" Gil looked a little taken back.

"Point taken." He replied, actually turning around and shutting up for once.

"Wow. That worked." Felix chuckled. He turned his head to the sounds of soft footsteps descending the stairwell. A moment or two later, Isaac, the pianist, appeared, flipping through several pages of sheet music, not paying attention to much else. He looked tired and a little frazzled from a long night of playing the instrument he loved and taking

requests from tired and depressed men of many origins. His hair was more out of place than usual and he looked as though if he even touched a bed he would keel over into a deep and total sleep. Nevertheless, he set his sheet music onto the stand on the piano without a word and sat down. He cracked his knuckles and prepared to play before Jenna halted him.

"Isaac, don't play just yet." Isaac withdrew his hands from the ivory and straightened his back up. Without so much as a gesture or turn, he silently asked Jenna why. "I'd like you to meet my friend, Mia. I told you about her, remember?"

The pianist turned around without making a sound and examined the woman that had made Jenna's acquaintance. She was without a doubt very beautiful, dressed in a deep midnight blue formal business dress that was common among the middle class and higher lower class. It wasn't a lavishly decorated dress, but rather a practical formal item. She seemed to have a sort of tortured and forced serenity about her that screamed out with an inner pain and decried her calm and even exterior. Yes, Isaac could sense this person had many troubles, and they were fresh at that. He had already known her father was recently deceased, but there seemed to be more to it than that now. He couldn't put his finger on what was wrong, but he knew it was there. However, despite how much Isaac knew was wrong, he had already filed this case in perspective with most every other person that ever set foot in the bar. She didn't seem any different than anyone else. Nevertheless, he walked over and kissed her hand in a typical gentleman's fashion and introduced himself.

"My name is Isaac. It is nice to meet you, Miss Mia. Jenna has told me a lot about you."

"The pleasure is mine, Isaac. And please, just call me Mia. I don't like having to be formal when not necessary." There was a brief pause, almost an awkward one, but Jenna piped in.

"Isaac, Mia is here to listen to you play the piano and sing a song." Isaac glanced at Jenna after this statement, and then he looked back to Mia. He could see that she was fighting a demon within herself and did indeed need some kind of respite. He nodded slowly once and sat himself down at the piano once more without another word. He warmed himself up with a C scale, and then he paused, looked at his music, and ran his fingers with the measures.

And then, he began to sing.

***Chapter 5*: Plying the Pen**

It was as if heaven itself opened its gates to allow the angels to spread the echoes of their fine voices all across the land. However, the melodious sounds were not spread over a distance nor gifted to several individuals. It seemed that heaven itself came from the throat of Isaac, the piano man.

Or, at least that's what Mia thought as she let the warmth of her blankets dull her senses. His performance earlier had been astounding, and she couldn't believe the voice Isaac was in possession of. Without a doubt, he was the finest singer she had ever heard in her life, and he was not truly famous for it, nor did he seem to care. Away from his piano, he certainly was the quiet and highly reserved person Jenna had painted him to be. He hardly spoke outside his interlude, but rather he seemed to subtlety communicate with his eyes and movement. Mia had no idea what Isaac was saying through this ulterior form of communication, but she could sense that both Jenna and Felix could. Thus, Isaac remained enigmatic to the newcomer, much as he was before she even met him.

That said, Mia did learn something about the obscure piano player that night. Through his melodious and full voice was a strange kind of melancholy. She couldn't place what exactly it was as opposed to Jenna's explanation. Jenna's take seemed plausible, but she thought there might have been more to it than the loss of his parents.

Loss of parents; Mia sure knew what that felt like now. With her mother long gone and her father now deceased, she understood that side of Isaac's demeanor, albeit not completely. However, the thought of her own father crossing her mind brought her back to tears. No matter how hard she

tried, she could never hold back when she was in private and her father came to mind. In public, she was barely able to hold a vigil, and the will reading was the toughest test of her strength yet. After she stormed out, what little strength she had left failed her and she wept in private for several minutes. No doubt the coming days would be equally taxing and probably more so. She rolled over in her bed. How she desired nothing more than her father to be alive. The demons that haunted her would be gone and she could continue being happy. James Calvin had always found a way to make something right no matter what.

Though. . . what could make things right now? The only respite she enjoyed was in the presence of the piano player. Naturally, the piano player would not always be there, nor would he likely play especially for her ever again. But, what other methods were there in truth? She had already tried drowning her sorrows in fiction, but all the works of authors of days past did was cause her to long for her father even more. After all, he got those scriptures for her. She tried the newspaper, but she soon discovered that reporters were predators for the unfortunate. Mia then tried to express her feelings through art, but the feeling the pen produced on the paper was not the emotions she was trying to convey. Not a thing she tried in the past two weeks worked at all. Her eyes had a constant dry feeling to them that she hated deeply; always dry and almost as frequently red. These same swollen eyes soon found their way closed and she drifted off into a light sleep.

However, sometimes respite cannot be found even in slumber.

The young man named Ivan aimlessly wandered around the bar, making sure everything was in its place. This is what he found himself doing every day lately. The job hunts were becoming more and more fruitless, and both Isaac and Gareth told him to stop trying. The young Jupiter Adept was prone to argue, but Gareth's hard head and Isaac's quiet persistence were unyielding, so he decided to not press the issue. Not hunting for a job bored him to no end, but it didn't bother him nearly so much as it would've Gareth or Isaac. Gareth would inevitably try to sneak out and Isaac would've just outright left whether anyone tried to stop him or not. But, it was this sort of obedience that set the young man apart from his older peers at the bar.

Ivan turned his purple eyes onto the only other person in the bar at the time. Her name, was Sheba. She was the youngest in the employ of the bar by a year, but she was probably the wisest aside from Felix. Her light emerald eyes were fixated on a piece of paper she was writing on pensively. The young woman was definitely lost in thought, and this put Ivan's mind at a strange sort of ease. At least Sheba had something to whittle the time away with until the busy hours.

Ivan very well knew that Sheba spent most of her time plying the pen. In fact, he was mildly envious of this. While they both could read and write, which was a very rare quality of the time, it was Sheba who could put the writing to good use. She always had a creative mind, which was something Ivan lacked. While Ivan himself was a clever individual, gifted with some amazing logic, he never was able to express himself freely. Sheba, on the other hand, was found constantly writing either poetry or some work of fiction, set in a world far away during far better times.

Her dream, of course, was to become a famous novelist. Her writing skills were always improving, and she was always

trying to invent new styles for herself to toy with. Already her skills surpassed anyone her age, and she was steadily getting more and more dynamic with her writing. She had started off in writing simple short stories and some short poems, but now she was actually working on a work of fiction which she hoped would someday be published.

No one told her, of course, that she would probably never be published while she was still alive. Books were not exactly selling well and very few people would be willing to spend money that could be used on food to use on leisure. Sheba, although a somewhat wise individual, was naïve to this. She believed that if her creative soul could soothe some, it could soothe many more and that others would realize it. This line of thought, by many of her time, would be considered stupid, foolish, and even selfish. However, the ones she was closest with thought she should pursue her dreams with all of her might.

In her mind, she didn't want to be famous for the sake of riches or wealth. Really, she wouldn't know what to do with them, nor did she really care about them. The young Jupiter Adept honestly believed that money sapped the creative spirit and only decayed the person from the inside out. To an extent, she was right. Wealth had never shown any spiritual bonus to her, or to many others for that matter. So, she figured there was little to be gained with money. What she wanted to be famous for was her style, and the emotions that she invoked with it.

Sheba's habit was a moderately expensive one; that was for sure. Paper, graphite, and ink didn't come cheap in the streets of Tolbi, and they could be hard to find from time to time. Despite the expense, Felix usually accommodated for the cost. Where he came up with the money was of suspect to Jenna sometimes, but when she confronted him, Isaac

stepped in. The piano player had told Felix to put his tip money towards Sheba's writing supplies, and swore Jenna to secrecy about it. This move was both unexpected and somehow appropriate for the golden-haired Venus Adept. Jenna kept her word, and Sheba knew nothing about it.

Ivan walked over behind her and studied the work the female scribe was in progress on. When Sheba became self-aware, which was only a moment later, she turned around to face him.

"Can I help you?" She asked, mildly irritated, her green eyes laced with a mild venom.

"What? I was just seeing what you were working so hard on."

"I've told you before, Ivan! No hints or sneak peeks. You'll have to wait until I finish the whole book."

"And how long will that take you?" The male Adept inquired, his purple eyes glinting with a catlike curiosity. Sheba smiled pensively and turned back around.

"Maybe in a year or so." She replied softly and with a bit of sarcastic pride.

"What?! That's an awful long time, Sheba!"

"Well, maybe I'll let you take a peek at a chapter or two some other time, Ivan." She rose, papers in her arms. Ivan looked remarkably disappointed, and Sheba's eyes sparkled lightly. "I was just playing, Ivan. I'll let you see some of it, and actually, I'll read it to you all when I get to a point where I feel as though I could stop well."

"That's something to look forward to." Ivan replied, after his eyes brightened. "When?" Sheba laughed.

"Whenever I feel like it," she mused, "and not a moment before." The author looked back at Ivan. She knew him very well, to the point where she could predict him down to the very word. Unfortunately, the road ran both ways and Ivan often was able to take Sheba off guard; almost as often as she got the better of him.

Ivan was much like her, but he was different enough that they were distinct from each other. The male Jupiter Adept was considerably more streetwise than his female counterpart, and was therefore more suited to the kind of environment they lived in. As well, the young man was remarkably more philosophical than Sheba. Ivan was certainly a strange combination of thought patterns. Very few men were capable of thinking rationally in a real world setting while having amazingly philosophical thoughts.

Isaac himself once commented on the Jupiter Adept's nature and while he refused to admit it, was impressed at the young man's mental versatility. However, when it came to writing or anything creative, this is where the boy's mind fell completely flat. He didn't like to discuss this weakness, because it was his dream to actually learn to become creative. He didn't care to be rich; he didn't care to be a famous philosopher, thinker, or psychologist. He wanted to be able to create massive worlds and dream like Sheba could.

Of course, he never admitted to this. It was obvious that Ivan was not the creative one among the lot of the tavern, and he never let on how much that really bothered him. He admired Sheba for her ability to express such deep emotion through words, and he envied Isaac for his ability to write his own music and stir up the emotions of dozens at a time. While he never felt ire towards either, he wished on a daily

basis he could do the things they did half as well. Ivan tried constantly to think of ways to become creative, but every time he failed and came up short.

This discouraged the young man, but he could never allow his disappointment to show; others looked to him as the sort of stability the bar needed. Felix aside, sometimes he was the only one who could keep a sort of order in the bar because of his wisdom. However, Ivan was not proud of this skill he had. The wisdom of the world he held on his shoulders did nothing but burden his soul with worry and constantly distracted him from his dream. Suffice to say, he'd trade his wisdom for Sheba's naivety any day.

Nevertheless, the Jupiter Adept kept his façade up and never truly revealed himself, not even to Sheba.

Sheba, however, was not so naive to be fooled by this mask. She knew he quietly suffered every day from hidebound. Teaching Ivan was not a simple task; most of the time he had been out looking for a job, and when he wasn't, he was too tired to learn. Now with him forced to stay back in the bar, she might have time, but teaching creativity was not as simple as teaching something like advanced calculus. The stuff of originality had to come from within; from the very soul of the person. While she had no doubt Ivan had the ability to become what he wished every day for, she knew it would be nearly impossible to break the barrier. However, once it was broken, it would never have to be breached again. Despite her knowledge of Ivan's true colors, she kept quiet to him about it, and was even more elusive to the other people of the tavern.

"You're always teasing everyone, Sheba." Ivan said. "Do you think that one day you will have your own material thrown back at you?"

"I'll deal with that if it ever comes . . . which I doubt." She replied, with an amused smile. Before Ivan could refute her, they both heard the door to the bar open up, and the raven haired Venus Adept stepped in.

"Felix!" Ivan said. "How'd your job hunt go?"

"No luck, as usual. Although I could've gotten five jobs if I wasn't an Adept."

"What is it with people and us Adepts anyway?! Do they think we're not fit for the job or what?!" Sheba exclaimed.

"No, that's not it." Ivan replied. "They feel as though that because we are Adepts that we would either pose a threat to the owners, managers, and foremen, and that we would demand higher wages because of our abilities. You see, because we can do so many things is why we are considered liabilities to companies."

"Why is that? I would think that they would want versatility in the workforce."

"And pay more to do it? Of course not. They would rather stick some inexperienced kid armed with only a wrench against an entire broken down assembly line than have an Adept work more than one job." Ivan sighed. "This is the sign of the times, I suppose."

"What if you say you're not an Adept, and then not use your powers on the job?"

"It would be giving the employer false information. That would get you thrown in prison. And as much of a Hell as it can be out there now, prison is ten times worse." Ivan lamented. "It's a lose-lose situation, really." Ivan paused

before he continued. "It is hard to believe they fear us. Your average Adept these days can't even throw a single Psynergy spell, except maybe Move or Catch. Very few can do anything more advanced. I guess they really do believe the rumors that Jupiter Adepts can read minds."

"That is rather silly." Sheba replied. "Reading minds? What's next? Seeing things that aren't really there?"

"It is absurd, most definitely." Felix replied. "Well, I suppose there could be worse things than being an Adept."

"Like what?" Sheba questioned.

"Being dead." Felix replied. Sheba and Ivan exchanged a quick glance and then nodded to the elder Adept. "Come on then. Let's get the bar set up for tonight. Isaac and Garet should be home almost any time now. Jenna won't be far behind either."

"Right." Ivan said, catching a cloth rag thrown to him by Felix. Sheba had already made her way upstairs to store her writing supplies before going to work.

"Do we have anything further on the Calvin case yet, Alex?" The golden eyed Mercury Adept asked his comrade. Alex, who was sitting at his stuffy desk scribbling through endless stacks of mostly completed paperwork, shook his head. Picard gave off a bit of a sigh. "Alex, tell me the truth. Does this job bother you at all?" The other Mercury Adept laid his pen down, clasped his hands together, folded them, closed his eyes, and gave off a silent sigh.

"Sometimes." Was his only reply.

"Can you give me a little more of an answer than that?"

"I'd prefer not to. Time is short, and the time where justice can strike back is even shorter." Alex replied, picking his pen back up and starting back on the paperwork.

It was like this, day in, day out for the ice-hearted Alex. He felt as though he had no soul most of the time, and yet he paid that feeling no heed. Souls were cheap in the world anyway. A soul was worthless, more like it. A soul couldn't feed you when you were hungry. A soul couldn't quench your thirst when you were parched. A soul couldn't keep you warm in the winter, nor could it protect you from your enemies, nor could it soothe the scars of time. Alex didn't care one way or the other if he had a soul or not. And considering the one thing his heart would want was vengeance, he probably didn't have much of one anyway.

Whatever heart he did have, died the same day his sister did.

"Well then, Alex. . ." Picard started. "When we get more information on the Calvin case, be sure to let me know about it."

"What interests you so much in that case, anyway?" Alex grumbled.

"Alex. . . did you not see how his daughter was?" Picard asked. "She was in shambles about her father's death. More than likely she is searching for answers, and we're the only ones who can probably give them to her!" The sight of seeing Calvin's daughter in such a state had a profound effect on the officer. The sorrowful tears that she had wept touched the deepest parts of his consciousness, breaking his former wide-eyed view of the world open.

"You're letting your emotions get to you." Alex replied, grimly. "That's not the way to do the job."

"Then what is the right way?" Picard asked, irritated.

"Keeping your cool and keeping your head." Alex sternly responded, going back to his work. Picard gave Alex a glare that he chose to ignore. Sighing in resignation, the golden-eyed Mercury Adept sat back at his desk and started filling out the ever-present misdemeanor reports. Even with the grueling amounts of paperwork he had in front of him, the young officer couldn't shake the need to work on the Calvin case. Something just didn't seem right about it; he was sure of it. Picard had convinced himself it wasn't a natural death; Alex, of course thought him foolish for this.

An hour passed, and the thoughts still would not escape his mind, even with Alex silently shoving Picard to continue his work. Eventually, Picard set his pen down and sat back in his chair, thinking. Of course, knowing how Murphy and his law worked, this would have to be the time when the Captain of the precinct would happen to walk in.

"Is something wrong?" Captain Iodem asked Picard, stern voice and all. The officer jumped noticeably as his thought train was derailed. He quickly picked back up his pen and began his work again, secretly hoping Iodem would leave. Again, Murphy dictated that he wouldn't. "I better not catch you slacking off again, private."

"I'm sorry sir. It won't happen again."

"What were you thinking about exactly, anyway, private?" Iodem asked, giving a commanding glare to Picard. The Mercury Adept swallowed hard, trying to think of an excuse, but then deciding it would be easier to go with the truth.

"Uh. . . the Calvin case, sir."

"That's right. You were one of the officers who investigated the scene, weren't you?"

"Yes sir!" He replied. Iodem silently regarded him, eying him carefully.

"That was. . . your first case of that nature?"

"Yes sir." The captain then sighed again.

"You'll get over it. All grunts get that feeling the first time they're on a death case. It's a matter of getting used to how things work in this city, son. You'll be fine next time. Just don't let it distract you. By the looks of it, you've got enough to do already." He said, glancing at Picard's inbox.

"Sir, may I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Could you let me know when any more info on the Calvin case comes in? I want to help in any way possible."

"You can help by finishing those reports. Now get to it!" Iodem ordered, walking away. Picard sighed and looked at his overflowing inbox. It was going to be a very long day; and there was no way he was going to get this all done by the end of his shift, so he'd have to work overtime. And of course, overtime was never a paid experience. Why would it be? That would be convenient and at the same time, compassionate. No, these were not the symbols of the time.

Compassion . . . now that was a weakness if ever there was one. Everyone knew that those who were kind to their neighbors would be the first to be trampled by the masses.

Show kindness to others? Why bother? It was pretty pointless to try. There were far too many people to help and there was far too little any one person could do. Besides, a man had to look out for himself above all others; what good would it be if you let your neighbor live with your gift of food while you die of starvation? Helping people . . . compassion . . . love. All were worthless to the whole; they were now extinct. The only thing that mattered was that you beat him by any means necessary.

It was then Alex rose from his seat and walked over to Picard's desk.

"Please don't you start too. . ." Picard grumbled as Alex's icy stare penetrated his eyes. Without a word, Alex picked up half of the papers in Picard's inbox, and walked back over to his desk. He then slipped the stack into his own, and formerly empty, inbox and started working once more.

"Alex?" He asked, puzzled. The other Mercury Adept made no move, save for pointing the tip of his pen at Picard, and the motion for him to get back to work.

A smile crossed Picard's face. Perhaps compassion wasn't as extinct as it seemed.

***Chapter 6*: Frozen**

A soft rustle passed through the wooden sanctuary of the tavern. Isaac and the piano were one as usual, with him shuffling his sheets of music. He played a few notes on the keys and then paused. Taking a nearby pen, he wrote on his only semi-complete music sheet. The piano man was clearly taking his knowledge of the keys to the next level; he began writing his own notes, seeing what he could come up with.

If one could clearly read his notation and music, his melody carried a matching tone to his appearance. His song was slow and deliberate, somber and careful, quiet and full. However, the music in reality compared to the music on the paper was two completely different things. Isaac's notation was sloppy and his handwriting was poor at best. The neighborhood chicken would likely make clearer marks on the paper, without running or smudging as much ink. That being said, Isaac himself had no trouble himself comprehending all of his work, mostly because he knew what he was thinking better than anyone else.

After pondering the next line of his score, the Venus Adept sat back on his bench and actually let his mind wander. The past few days had been quite busy, with many faces, both familiar and new coming in and out. One of the newer people to come in was Kraden's young assistant, Wing Sarten, and a renowned professor by the name of Georg Lichtenstein.

Sarten was an educated person of twenty years. The young man had been taken under Kraden's teachings when the professor realized the boy's potential and intelligence. Wing himself was of medium height and of student's build. His dark brown hair, much like many in the city of Tolbi, sat in an

organized spiked mess atop his head. Wing's eyes were emerald in shade, and they sparked with a natural intelligence. His clothing was simple; a plain white dress shirt and a pair of navy blue trousers with black socks and shoes.

Professor Georg Lichtenstein, on the other hand, was a man of as many years as Professor Kraden. Age had taken hold of the man; wrinkles and age marks slowly taking over his skin. However, the signs of age did not curtail the glowing aura of experience from his presence. His ice blue eyes contrasted a great deal with his white hair and bushy eyebrows. He was clothed in a plain brown suit, with plain brown shoes. He was not at all an extravagant man; if anything, he was more down to earth than even the simplest of folk. Through all of these simplicities, he and Kraden were intellectual equals and remarkably well known in the education world.

Isaac found these people both interesting, as well as annoying. Out of the three of them, he could only stand Kraden over any sort of period of time. Perhaps it was because the scholar knew when to speak and knew when to keep silent, or maybe it was his liberal idealism. Either way, the professor was one of the few people Isaac welcomed as company at any given time. Although when he chose to be in Kraden's presence, he still scarcely said a word, but rather turned an ear to the teacher to listen.

Sarten however, was far too idealistic for his own good. He believed that the government should be responsible for just about everything. His wide-eyed perspective annoyed Isaac a great deal, but the pianist never spoke up against Kraden's assistant. It wasn't worth the trouble or the effort. Arguing with a stubborn idealist who was likely planning of writing his efforts down and publishing them; well... that wasn't a good idea unless he wanted his ears chewed off.

Lichtenstein just bothered the piano man to no end. Isaac would testify that Georg was a great man, both wise and kind. What really bothered Isaac was how utterly meticulous Georg could get. The professor was precise to the highest possible standard, and therefore he spent a lot of time correcting people. This got on Isaac's nerves, as well as many others.

Isaac was snapped out of his deep thoughts by a call from a friend.

"Isaac?"

"What is it, Jenna?" Isaac asked coolly, looking back over his notation.

"We're going to be having company later tonight."

"Mia?" Isaac asked, not really paying attention.

"No, they're some of Felix's old friends; you remember them." Isaac snorted lightly, signaling he had no idea who she was speaking of. "They're Proxian."

"It's Saturos and Menardi then." Isaac replied.

"Indeed." Felix stated, descending the staircase. "It has been far too long since I've last seen them."

"When will they be here, brother?" Jenna asked.

"Later this evening, Jenna. Until then, I want you two to help me clean up the bar a little bit more than usual."

"I don't see why we need to." Jenna replied. "I mean, they're both as down to earth as you."

"It's not like you have to make a first impression." Isaac replied. "The two of them are your best friends." Felix smiled warmly and tossed a rag into Isaac's face. The Venus Adept pulled the rag off his visage and frowned indignantly. Before he could reply, Felix raised a finger and cut him off.

"Just do it, piano man." He said with another smile.

There was a knock on the large wooden door. The sound resonated throughout the large office, reflecting off the walls and bookcases. The soft scratching of a pen stopped with the emergence of the sound.

"Come in." A feminine voice replied. The doorknob turned immediately following her acknowledgement. As the big door to the chamber opened, it gave off a distinctive creak. "Good afternoon, Mr. Morris. What can I do for you?" Mia Calvin asked, looking up from her paperwork.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Calvin." The elder man replied, closing the wooden door behind him.

"Please, just call me Mia."

Morris's expression brightened lightly as he approached his superior's desk. "Your father was very adamant about people calling him James, you know. Truly you are his daughter." He replied. John Morris was a man of short stature, clad in an expensive looking battleship gray suit with a crimson red tie. His hair was a shiny and rich black and his eyes were a calm chestnut brown. The businessman's manner was kind and respectful, warm and inviting. It was no mystery why James Calvin was a close friend to this man.

"Father hated formalities too?" Mia questioned.

"Oh, yes. Very much so." Morris returned with a hint of a smile. "He absolutely insisted that anyone, be it a co-worker or a factory worker, call him James." Mia was inwardly relieved somewhat by this revelation. However, this relief came at the cost of saddening her with memories of her late father. "He was such an unorthodox businessman; but not only was he good at it, he was a good friend." The man sighed. He looked to what Mia had been working on when he came in. "Oh, I'm sorry; you look very busy with that income report. Should I come back when you finish it?"

"No, it's fine. What's on your mind?"

"I just came to remind you that there is a stockholder's meeting in an hour and a half. Considering you own 51 percent of the company, it would be prudent for you to attend. In fact, because this is the very first stockholders meeting since you took over you really can't afford to miss it."

Mia nodded in reply. "It's not like I had a desire to go home early anyway." She replied solemnly.

Morris's expression softened considerably. "I know the past few days have been very taxing on you. This job isn't an easy one, especially for someone in your position. I doubt Jacobson and some of the others haven't made this as easy as you would've hoped." Mia's head dipped into what resembled a nod. "Despite that, I'm sure James would be so proud of you if he knew how quickly you have picked up this job."

"I'm flattered; though there's a lot more to this job than I am yet to know."

"That is true as well; but you have started out very well." Morris turned on the ball of his left foot. "I'll leave you to the work. Remember, the stockholder meeting, Mia. It's very important." The older man then excused himself from the room, leaving the female president alone.

No, this job hadn't been easy. Not by any means. The very day she took over, she found a typed threat letter in her desk. Every day since then she had gotten venomous stares from almost every executive in the company. Not only that, but they constantly tried to dodge any assignments she had to give them, and then did their very best to avoid her at any cost. Even if she had managed to get the work to them, they did the bare minimum, and much of their work was riddled with intentional mistakes that she was forced to iron out. She had no time to chew them out, and it was likely it would do no good anyway. They were already bitter that they lost a possible promotion, but to lose the position to a woman was unthinkable. So, they struck back in every way they could.

At times, it seemed like only Morris was on her side, and it was very possible that he really was her only ally. Arkan, Calvin Steel's vice president remained neutral on the whole issue, not wishing to get involved on either side. Jacobson was making accounting a living hell; he had become very ornery about doing his job, and often turned in ledgers at the last possible second when they were ready days in advance. Klein had done little to stunt production at all, but it was obvious he was still a little reluctant to let Mia take the helm. Finch was too busy with his own work to do anything about Mia's appointment, but he didn't seem to have any desire to cause problems. Babi, who remained absent from the building most of the time, was passively resisting the change. She wasn't sure what exactly Babi had

been up to during his absence, but she was certain it was not in her favor.

The stockholder's meeting was going to truly be a nightmare.

The president of Calvin Steel walked behind the lectern and prepared to speak. She was on an elevated podium, looking into a rather large room filled to the brim with stockholders, both major and minor. The eyes the group fiercely studied her. Each pair of eyes held deep veins of ire and contempt. Some boiled with a fiery hatred, others froze with a nasty antagonizing stare. Still others bared the fangs of a viper, and even more still were blades of the sharpest swords, ready to pierce her alive. The temperature of the room seemed to rise ten degrees immediately after Mia took her position behind the lectern.

"Good evening, stockholders of Calvin Steel." She began. "As you know, the company has been through many changes in the past few weeks. The untimely death of my father has put the company in a temporary state of instability. However, I know that this instability is not insurmountable. My father built this company from the ground up to be very stable, and I am sure we can continue his legacy with pride." She paused. "With a little bit of time and effort, we can fix the small problems and continue to be a leading competitor in the steel manufacturing business." The eyes in the room did not soften at all. If anything, the gazes grew more and more venomous and penetrating.

"Compete? With a woman as our president?!" A random voice from within the crowd said.

"We're the laughing stock of the business community!"
Another voice sounded.

"There's no way anyone will buy our products now!"

"Please, order." Mia said. "We will not be a laughing stock because we will continue to perform as everyone has come to expect, and we shall do more than that."

"Big talk coming from a woman!" A heckling voice lashed out.

"Yeah, you can't compete! You don't have any killer spirit!"

"A woman's place is in the kitchen!"

"Go home and make me my dinner!"

Mia's blue eyebrows arched downward at these harsh comments. "Enough!" She shouted.

"Oh, she's angry. Maybe we should stop!" Laughter burst out among the masses of businessmen, who seemed to be enjoying every moment of Mia's torment. Mr. Babi was the only one whose expression remained unchanged.

"Maybe she'll go home and let a real man do the job!"

"She's not even a real woman! She's not even married!"

"Only thing that stupid girl is good for is the convent." The snide remarks continued for several more moments, each of the remarks growing more and more stinging and personal. Every insult in the book had been thrown at her, plus a few new additions. When the businessmen seemed to lull in their assault, the president spoke.

"Are you all quite finished?" Mia demanded, her eyes solid with an icy rage.

"No way in hell!"

"Well, if you all are so displeased with my leadership and direction, you can take all of your shares of stock, all of your precious pennies, and all of your petty insults and shove them up where the sun doesn't shine!" The room fell silent. This was a first; nowhere before had anyone been so outright blunt to their opponents at a Calvin Steel stockholder's meeting; and the last person it would've been thought to come from was a woman. "Any questions, gentlemen?"

"Yeah, I have one." A man said, standing up. "When do you plan on stepping down to let someone competent take the job?" More laughter resonated through the room.

"I can see that this meeting is over." Mia replied venomously, eyes still chilled with anger. "To all those who actually care about the state of this company while it is under my supervision, I will see you at the next meeting in two weeks. As for the rest of you who do not approve of my position, don't bother coming back. If you're going to be part of the problem, you will not be a part of this company. Good evening." The president quickly wheeled around and deliberately walked out the door.

She was right; the meeting had been hell.

Jenna had just finished scrubbing the last table just as a knock came to the front door of the tavern. Felix was swift to round the bar and answer the call. No sooner did the door swing open was Felix embraced in a hug by two visitors.

"Felix! How have you been?" A woman's voice asked. Her phrase was laced with joy and excitement, all because of the sight of seeing an old friend.

"It has been quite awhile." The man who came in with her said after releasing the tavern owner.

"Indeed it has, my friend."

Jenna put her cleaning rag aside and walked over to greet her older brother's friends. "Saturos, Menardi; how long has it been since we last saw you two?"

"Oh, six months, I think?" Saturos replied. His voice was thick with a powerful Proxian accent, which made his words a little difficult to understand.

The man had emigrated from the country of Prox when he was young with several thousand refugees fleeing a terrible famine in their homeland. Menardi and her younger sister Karst were also part of the same group of refugees. They came to Tolbi for the same reason everyone else came; they thought they could rise in society like a rags to riches fantasy tale. However, the dream they had remained just that; in Tolbi they were scarcely better off than in their homeland.

Saturos and Menardi had fled from Prox to escape hunger. What they arrived to was not welcome arms as they had hoped. They arrived to discrimination, hatred, unemployment, unsanitary conditions, corruption, and distrust. Coming from Prox, they were much different than any average Tolbi citizen. Their unusual skin tones and thick accents pointed them out as foreigners. Unfortunately, many Tolbians harbored a fear of the peoples of Prox.

Throughout history, Prox was involved in a number of great wars. The Proxian peoples were known as the greatest and most aggressive of warriors. Tales of vicious and terrible fighters and mages ran amok through peoples around the world. Every tall tale was believed; everything from the so called practice in which every warrior who downed a foe in battle would drink a pint of their victim's blood to the rumor that all women performed devil summoning rituals nightly to keep their men.

Of course, none of this was true. Yes, Prox had fought in a number of wars, most of which were in self defense from invasion. It was true that their warriors were of an excellent mold and were well trained. This is where they got their infamous reputation. However, in truth, the people of that nation were truly peaceful, wanting nothing more than to simply enjoy life, whether it be a simple or grand. Unfortunately, the intimidating features of most Proxians, the pointy ears, the oddly colored skin and eyes, and the reputation as dangerous fighters made them hated in most civilizations.

Saturos, Menardi, and Karst all learned very quickly how the world of Tolbi worked. Being Proxian was bad enough, but also being Adepts . . . well, that didn't work out very well in their favor. They had faced many hardships in their new home. Saturos had taken a very long time to find a job; even when he finally did, it was a very low paying factory job with no safety precaution. More than once he came home injured by the dangerous equipment in his factory. Thankfully, both Karst and Menardi knew some healing Psynergy, and they were able to keep Saturos patched up. Fortunately for the laborer, none of his injuries were life threatening at any time; however, his continued attendance even after injury made his coworkers highly distrustful.

Menardi and Karst couldn't get jobs professionally, so both worked as seamstresses in their own home. Unfortunately, mechanical devices and power looms replaced most manual labor for even this market, so the prices the female Proxians charged were absurdly low. They had no choice; competition was thick and fierce, and they needed every cent they could get.

"Six months. It really has been far too long." Felix said.

"Yes it has." Menardi replied, sitting down on a bar stool.

"So Felix, you look as though you're doing very well." Saturos replied. "Where is everyone else?"

"I'll call them down." He returned, walking to the base of the staircase. "Everyone! They're here, come down and say hello!" Footsteps above followed immediately, some quick, some slow, but all eventually came downstairs.

"Saturos, Menardi! Very nice to see you again!" Gareth bellowed in his trademark jovial voice, hugging both of the visitors in a powerful grip.

"Ah, good to see you too!" Menardi gasped out, trying to loosen Gareth's bear hug a little too much.

"Could you loosen up a little, Gareth?" Saturos asked, his voice slightly raspy from the strength of the bartender.

"Ooh, sorry." Gareth replied, letting them go.

"So, how are you and Jenna getting along, kid?" Saturos asked, slapping him on the back. Both Jenna and Gareth blushed slightly as the visitor asked.

"We're..." Gareth stuttered.

"We're engaged!" Jenna finished.

"Really? So you're actually going to spend the rest of your life with that woman?" Saturos asked, giving Gareth a look of disbelief. The larger Mars Adept paled slightly as the smaller questioned his decision. After seeing this, Saturos burst out laughing. "You've got it good, Gareth. You two will be fine."

"Saturos, you were about this close to death a few seconds ago." Jenna fumed, making a pinch gesture with her right hand.

"Forgive him, Jenna. He's never grown up completely." Menardi sighed.

"Do any men ever grow up?" Jenna inquired rhetorically.

"No." The other female replied.

"Ivan, Sheba, get over here and let me get a look at you two!" Saturos exclaimed. Both Jupiter Adepts obeyed and stood in front of him, smiling. "You two have grown quite a bit. Though, you still are a small fry, Ivan."

"I'm not short!"

"Stop picking on our hosts, Saturos." Menardi sighed. Saturos feigned a look of innocence that Menardi gave a snide look to. "Don't think that innocent act works on me, mister. I've got you pegged."

"It looks like we have a pair of understudies for Gareth and Jenna." Sheba said, chuckling. Almost everyone burst out laughing, save for the piano man and Jenna.

"Are you implying that I have Gareth whipped?"

"Implying nothing; stating yes!" Sheba laughed.

"Hello Menardi, Saturos." Isaac said, keeping his tone as even as always, his eyes as calm as ever.

"Isaac, hello! Are you still playing the piano like you always used to?" Menardi asked. Isaac nodded slowly as not to be curt. "Could you please play us something?"

"Yes, it has been too long since we've heard you on the keys, old friend. I'm sure you've become even more sublime than you were before." Isaac regarded Saturos's words with a glance of his sapphire eyes and the slightest of nods. The Venus Adept turned around and walked to his instrument.

The song that followed was no less than gorgeous. The notes were played with an astounding perfection; a powerful precision flowed through his music. This flawlessness was not a practiced one; no, this excellence came from the talent, it seemed. Every measure, every note, every beat dripped with an amazing brew of beauty. When he finished his show, he rose to the applause of everyone in the bar.

"More beautiful than I remember." Saturos said, rising. "You should play professionally, you know."

"I'd rather not." Isaac stated, rather bluntly.

"Why not?"

"I'm not for sale." The piano man replied, in the same cold tone he always used, this time adding a bit more frost to his words than normal.

"I see." Saturos replied.

"Alright you two, enough being somber! We have guests, let's have a good time!" Jenna exclaimed.

Several hours after the arrival of the Proxians, there came another knock at the door. Despite the sign marked "Closed," this knock persisted for a few moments. Finally, the door to the cool and misty night opened.

"I'm sorry, but we're closed right now." Jenna said as the door opened.

"My apologies, I'll. . . come another time."

"Mia?" Jenna asked, shock filling her eyes. "What are you doing out here so late at night?"

"I needed to relax. . . see a friendly face or two. It's been a horrible day."

"Well, come in, come in. I'm sorry, I didn't know it was you." She said, helping Mia inside. The young woman looked absolutely exhausted. Her eyes sagged with fatigue and she looked remarkably tense. The Mercury Adept was wearing the same blue dress she wore the last time she had visited the bar, but its casual look belied the obvious agitation its wearer had.

"Jenna, who was it?" Felix asked, turning around from speaking with his friends. His chestnut brown eyes caught sight of Mia, and he nodded. "I see. Good evening, Mia!"

"I'm sorry to come here at such an hour." Mia said, averting her eyes from Felix's warm gaze. The owner looked at Jenna's female friend and nodded.

"It's fine, Mia. You're one of Jenna's friends, and you always have a place here."

"Thank you for being so kind, Mr. Felix."

"Please, Felix is fine."

"Hey, who's your sister's friend, Felix?" Menardi asked, looking around him.

"This is Mia. I met her a few weeks ago here in the bar. She's been dropping by for visits every now and then. Believe me; it's good to have the company sometimes." Jenna smiled.

"Well, don't be so shy then." Saturos said. "You're among friends here. My name is Saturos, and this is Menardi."

"Pleased to meet you." Mia replied. She knew on sight they were Proxian; it wasn't the first time she'd ever seen one, though speaking to one was a new experience to her.

"Hey Isaac, isn't it time for you to play again?" Jenna asked over the heads of her visitors. Isaac, who was still sitting at his piano stool, cocked his head toward Jenna's voice. "I mean, I think we could all use another one of your songs."

The Venus Adept's eyes hardened a little, studying what Jenna had in mind. Obviously she was asking for a reason; a reason she obviously didn't care to say aloud. She knew that he would take this course, so she quickly put up her best façade to avoid his calculating stare. It was in vain though. Isaac quickly figured out why Jenna asked him to play again, even with her mask on. The Mars Adept wanted him to play for Mia. It was clear that Jenna hadn't gotten past the notion of trying to set them up. By having him play, she probably would allow Mia to think that he'd play for her whenever she

came in. Isaac gave off a silent sigh; there was no way around it without being rude to everyone.

"Very well." Isaac said quietly and shortly.

"Can I make a request?" Menardi asked. Isaac turned his gaze to the Proxian, and nodded. "Play that one you used to practice a lot when we visited last. You know, the long one; the one that was probably half an hour in full length?"

"Fine." Isaac replied. "I'll be right back." He rose from his seat and quickly disappeared upstairs without another word. Conversation between the people below perforated the floorboards below him as he searched through his drawers and folders of sheet music. Searching through countless pages of music vexed him as he tried to find the one Menardi requested. Of course it had to be the one he hadn't played since he perfected it four months ago. Isaac sighed as he finally found the tables he was looking for, and he sat back on his bed.

It was already very late at night, and Saturos and Menardi wouldn't be leaving until tomorrow morning. Mia wasn't likely to leave until morning either; it was now too dangerous in the streets to let a woman walk home alone; especially one as attractive as her. Isaac pondered where their unexpected guest would sleep that night; Gareth and Jenna had already given up their bed to Saturos and Menardi. Well, it was more than likely Felix would make the offer to give up his. However, Isaac somehow didn't feel right about letting Felix give up his bed; if Mia decided to stay the night, he would give up his own.

The Venus Adept stopped as he rose from his bed suddenly. Did he just think what he thought he did? This was unusual to say the least; Isaac, though not necessarily selfish, rarely

allowed thoughts like those to cross his mind. Mia was a friendly person, and Isaac certainly had no problems with her, but for him to stick his neck out for a relative stranger to the family? He sighed in exasperation; he was worried Jenna's prodding had somehow gotten to his head. Or, perhaps it Felix was starting to rub off on him. Either way, Isaac forced the thoughts from his mind and walked downstairs to play for his audience.

***Chapter 7*: Lessons**

Authors Notes: Hey everyone. Sorry about the very lengthy delay in updating. One thing has led to another for the past several months and I haven't gotten around to this story. I'm terribly sorry, everyone. I'll try to be more diligent in updating this in the future, but this story requires a special mood to write, so don't expect constant updates, but I'm going to try to be better about it. Thanks for all of your support and patience!

The room slowly brightened, focus finally returning to once exhausted eyes. A brush of her slender hand wiped clear the fog that remained hindering sight. The light that entered the room from the small window in front of her was dim and gray, giving evidence to the overcast skies that hung above the city. Mia brushed a few strands of cerulean hair out of her face and sat forward. Quietly, the young woman studied her surroundings.

Mia was in a much smaller room than she was used to sleeping in, so the area felt cozy almost to the point of being cramped. As well, the room was very scarcely decorated. The walls were a drab white that was discolored from age and wear; obviously the room hadn't been repainted in quite some time. The floor below was of the same simple floorboard design as the bottom level, and nothing adorned it. Along the wall left and opposite of the bed was a medium sized dresser with several drawers, all appearing to be stuffed to the brim. Most of these said drawers didn't contain clothes, however. Edges of paper could be seen sticking from the cracks of the storage space, and it was obvious there were measures and notes on them. Atop the dresser

was her blue casual dress and blouse, neatly folded to avoid getting too badly wrinkled. Across from where she lay was a small window that provided no real view at all, save for the side of another building and a little bit of the darkened sky above. Beside that window was another door, which was probably a small closet where the real owner of the room kept all of their actual clothes.

The bed Mia had slept in was a small twin sized bed, but if it was any indication how small the room really was, the bed took up a great deal of space. Also, it wasn't particularly the most comfortable bed she'd ever slept in. The legs needed a little bit of tightening, and the springs that were within the mattress were old and creaked whenever she moved more than slightly. However, the pillow she slept on was well fluffed and was remarkably comfortable. The sheets covering the mattress were plain white and were thin from years of use. The next blanket on the bed was made of a soft blue material that kept the bed surprisingly warm. The comforter on top was a simple deep crimson quilt that pressed down on her frame when she reclined, but caused no interference with her movement as she sat upright.

As the cool morning air wafted into the room, she gave a slight shiver as it brushed by her skin and she quickly slid back beneath the covers. While her head rest in the soft pillow, she began to reflect on the night before.

After Isaac had returned from retrieving his music, he sat down and played one of the most glorious songs she had ever heard. Menardi was correct when she said the song itself was a good thirty minutes in length; in fact, it was closer to an hour. When the pianist finally concluded his serenade, the group of listeners he had soundly applauded him. He had taken their applause with a simple nod of his head, and the slightest of glints in his soulful eyes. However,

the motions he made with his hands afterward indicated that they had grown weary. Obvious to the fact that he wouldn't play the instrument any further that night, Jenna sat everyone down for more small talk over tea.

During this time, Mia learned much about the friends she had made. Saturos and Menardi turned out to be some of the finest individuals she had ever met. Both of the Proxians were kind and compassionate, even to a total stranger like her. It was a small wonder why Jenna's brother was such close friends with them. Despite all outward appearance; Saturos' in particular, they were calm and very friendly. Saturos' blood red eyes, piercing and very frightening at first glance, were in truth very deep and extremely passive. Menardi's lighter eyes were much the same.

With a quiet sigh, she rolled on to her side and faced the wall. During the small talk, she did her best to avoid saying too much about herself. These friends, the dear people that were both kind and caring, she was worried she would lose them if they found out who she was. She was of the higher class, easy off, with lots of money. They were of a lower class, fighting to make ends meet. Unlike a lot of people in her financial class, she was actually afraid of what they'd think of her. She was terrified that if they found out she was president of one of Tolbi's biggest companies they would turn their backs on her or grow resentful. As it stood now, Mia had no other friends at all. The thought of being alone again sent a shiver through her spine.

They'd shown her so much kindness already, Jenna, Felix, Garet, and even the pianist, Isaac. As strange as it sounded, all Mia wanted to do was to return the same to them. She never had this sort of feeling before. Though it was new, she couldn't help but to love it right away. She loved it, and could never release it.

Now fully awake, she rose back to her sitting position, and slowly swung her legs to the open side of the bed. After she pushed herself out of the bed, she quickly dressed and prepared to make her appearance down below. Though she doubted anyone was concerned about her appearance, she made sure that her dress was straightened and ran her fingers through her hair to give it order. When she was satisfied, she gave a quick nod to herself, and reached for the doorknob.

The old and slightly rusted knob made a squeak as she gently turned it, releasing the door from its closed position. She took a deliberate pace to her walk, both through the hallway, then down the stairs.

"Morning, Mia!" Jenna's voice sounded from below, when she was about halfway down.

"Good morning, Jenna." She said, looking at her friend as she descended the final steps. She was standing behind the counter wiping clean a mug with a rag. The only other in the room was Isaac, who sat in his usual spot, with his usual face and usual pen. He was obviously focused on working on his music, his eyes darting from measure to measure. "Good morning, Isaac."

"Good morning." He replied without turning his attention away. His tone was neither warm or cold, and not even Jenna could discern whether he meant it or if he was simply dismissing their guest.

"How did you sleep, Jenna?"

"Myself and Garet slept very well." She smiled. "Though I am a tad stiff from sleeping on the floor."

"And you, Isaac?"

"I slept fine."

"How'd you sleep in Isaac's room, Mia?" Jenna asked. Isaac's left eye twitched ever so slightly at Jenna's seemingly innocent query. Isaac knew she was prying for something to hang over his head. His mind ran several different curses silently. Isaac had no regrets about lending his room out to Mia at the moment, but he had a nasty feeling that Jenna was going to make him find a few.

"Soundly, Jenna." She replied. "Thank you for letting me sleep in your room, Isaac."

Isaac's head turned slightly. Mia's eyes were on him, and she wore a slight smile on her countenance. Though he would normally give a nod in recognition, he felt the need to actually speak. "You're welcome." Isaac's keen sapphire eyes caught an obvious glint in Jenna's.

"Hey, where are Saturos and Menardi?" Mia asked.

"They went out with Felix for awhile. What they're doing, I've no idea."

"And Gareth?"

"Job-hunting." She returned.

Isaac flinched at this, unbeknownst to the females in the room. He had decided to take the day off from job hunting; truth be told, he hadn't slept well at all the previous night. Gareth's loud snoring on the floor nearby prevented him from getting any real rest. Also the truth was he hadn't wanted to take the day off; Jenna had essentially forced him to stay in. She was like an overbearing big sister sometimes.

"Mia, would you like to join us for dinner tonight?"

"No, I've some things I need to take care of. Thank you for the generous offer though."

"I see." Jenna replied, a bit disappointed.

"Perhaps another time?"

"Of course. It'd be nice to have you over again."

"Thank you." The cerulean haired woman replied, visibly embarrassed. "I'm glad I'm not... a burden, or anything. If you ever want me gone for one reason or another. . ."

"Don't you worry yourself about that." Jenna replied. "You could never be a burden, right Isaac?"

Another calculated strike by his friend. She was sure persistent; it was a wonder Mia hadn't caught on to all of this yet. "No, she's. . . no trouble at all." He said, pretending to only pay half attention to them. What else could he say? He was backed into a corner.

"I'm glad." Mia replied, still outwardly embarrassed. "Still, I really hate to leave. . . but I must get going." Mia and Jenna quickly exchanged farewells, and she soon departed. Shortly after she knew Mia was out of earshot, Jenna turned to Isaac; though before she could begin he turned and cut her off.

"If you're going to start in on me, I'll have no part of it."

"Why, Isaac. . . I can't believe you would think I'd do something like that." She laughed, eyes glinting with amusement. Isaac couldn't tell for himself if the laughter he heard was a pleasant sound or a demonic one. "Though. . . it was very unexpected of you to put your room up for her like that."

"I just felt as though Felix shouldn't have to give up his room whenever we have an odd numbered guest. You know very well Felix would've given up his room if I hadn't said otherwise."

"Even then he put up quite the fight, didn't he?" Jenna sighed. "Still though. . . she's your type, Isaac."

"Too flighty for my tastes."

"You don't know her as well as you think."

Isaac snorted. "And why are you trying to push Mia on me? Did she ask you to do it or something?"

"Not at all." Jenna said, giving her patented sly look. "I'm just doing this because I think it'd be good for you."

"What would? Love?" Isaac asked, almost indignantly.
"We've been over this, Jenna. I'm not interested. It's a silly child's game and I don't wish to play it."

"You know what they say, Isaac... those who are the most cynical about love are the ones who yearn for it the most."

"I'm not yearning for anything except a steady paycheck to help keep this bar alive as long as I can."

"Keep telling yourself that, Isaac. It won't change anything."

"Jenna, why are you so held up on this, anyway?" Isaac sighed, locking a fierce eye contact with his friend.

"Just because... a woman like that doesn't come along every day, Isaac. There's something special about her, you know. It's just a feeling I get about some people. I definitely think she's for you, my dear friend." She said, the utmost earnest

in her voice and the deepest truth in her eyes. Isaac, catching this, shrugged in response.

"If that's what you believe... then by all means, believe it. However, like any belief. . . it isn't necessarily true." Isaac retorted, rising from his seat. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to catch up on some of my rest. I don't know how you sleep in the same room with Gareth... he's the human saw mill if there ever was one. I'll be down later." The piano man quickly made his way upstairs before Jenna could press the argument once more.

He quickly retreated into his tiny room and bolted the door. With a sigh, he pressed his back against the doorway. He didn't know what was going on. A few weeks ago if Jenna had tried anything like this he would've been close to irate. Though he snapped at her like he did, he wasn't as mad as he would've been. Removing his vest and shirt, he threw them with disregard onto his dresser. He threw himself onto his bed and gave off a more exasperated sigh than before. He figured his sudden internal patience with Jenna stemmed from knowing her so long. He knew it was typical for her to do this kind of thing. After all, she teased Gareth incessantly when she had a crush on him. While it was obvious she didn't have a crush on him, he was pretty sure playing matchmaker was how she got her kicks now. He rolled onto his side and let his eyes slide closed. He began drifting off to sleep as he felt a tickle on his nose. He shot forward with a violent sneeze. Grumbling to himself, he looked down at and then picked up his irritant. It was a thin strand of cerulean blue hair left by Mia from the previous night. With a silent curse, he lay back down and drifted to sleep.

Though it was only early afternoon, the sky above was foreboding and dark. The sun usually shone an ironic light over the somber city; though today, the heavens embodied the very feel of Tolbi. The ominous black clouds curled amongst one another, like many vipers in a cramped snake pit. These serpents of the sky were desperately trying to wring tears from one another, to bring water down on the city below. The rain that was threatening wouldn't be out of character for the mood of the town, but it would be unwanted. Though the skies reflected how much of the city felt, the shedding of tears was always considered a sign of weakness. However, the heavens were free to cry as they willed without fear of being chastised. Perhaps this was a lesson to the people about emotion, though it was doubtful any would take heed of it.

Down below, in the humid and hot streets of the city, there were the very people the heavens sought to educate. Every one of them walked down the roads, both the driven and the aimless. The men, the women, the young, the elderly; all of them moving, unaware, uncaring, of the sky's silent teachings. One of these people was a man. This man, like most of these others alongside him, was lost. No, he knew where he was, and where he was going. He knew where the store was, and what the fastest route was to it. He even knew where the cobbler ran his moonlighting operation. What he was lost from was whatever path he wanted to take in life years ago.

The path this man had always desired was a simple one. In his life, he wanted nothing more than to live peacefully. He wanted nothing more than a roof and food. He wanted nothing more than to be able to smile. Alas, while he did have the roof and the food, he lacked the other two. What pained him the most was the loss of his smile. Never since that day had one even tugged at his cheeks; his face had

since become a cold stone, like a statue in a museum. His manner was so frozen in steel, he was a suit of armor like the knights of old once wore.

Though his continence remained even and constant, deep within, turmoil beyond belief raged. Storms and tempests plagued him every waking hour of every day. The maelstroms that blew through his mind ripped and thrashed at his sanity; some days he teetered dangerously close to madness. Other days he was closer to despair and depression. Never once in many years had he felt joy. Yet, through all of this chaos, all of this discourse, his face remained completely unchanged.

No one turned an eye to his seemingly stoic face. Everyone everywhere had seen it thousands of times over. This man was merely average in a wave of endless. He didn't care though. He didn't want sympathy, nor did he want pity. This was his problem, and he intended to deal with it himself. However, he had been trying to deal with it himself for many years now, and he had gotten no better than when he started.

He then looked up to the overcast sky when he reached his destination. Protruding in his vision was a rather plain steeple, with a worn and tattered metal sun upon its top. Attached to it was a worn down old stone church with simple stained glass windows, and sturdy strong oak doors. The stone lining the outside of the church was covered in mold and moss; age was clearly getting the best of this place. Upon the grounds was a small and decrepit cemetery, and this is where the wanderer walked to. Strolling between the graves deliberately, he stopped when he reached a certain small headstone. The traveler bent down and brushed some moss out of the fading lettering on the epitaph.

A light drizzle began to fall as he laid a small bouquet of flowers upon the earth in front of him. He quietly murmured the name on the gravestone over and over, his voice no louder than the impact of the light rain on the ground about him.

"I'm sorry, sister." Alex said, looking at the flowers he just laid down. His eyes slowly began to water. "I wasn't there for you when you needed me." The officer's once stoic face began to melt into obvious depression. "Some brother I am, huh? I storm out of the house because of some stupid fight with father. . . and when I return. . ." Alex's voice was quickly breaking, and tears began to mix with the soft rain hitting his face. "I'm sorry." He cried. Alex had been sitting on his legs, but as he broke down he leaned against the headstone for support. As he rested upon the stone, he allowed his right cheek to brush the front of it.

"The day I lost you, Ambi. . . I didn't think I could go on. You were the one thing that kept me going through everything father did. You were there, inspiring me, keeping me happy, even if you had no reason to smile yourself." Alex pushed himself from the grave and sat back on his legs. The rain began to fall harder all around him and he allowed his mind to wander back to the days when his sister remained on the mortal coil.

His parents were far from perfect, let alone good. Alex's mother hardly said a word to either of them, and when she did, it was usually to scold them for something their father did. She was scarcely loving; her common demeanor was apathy. Despite how cold his mother was, his father was even worse. His father was a foul-mouthed, abusive, and was more often than not unemployed. He treated both Ambi and Alex as lesser life forms, giving them second-rate treatment in everything he possibly could. Even when Alex was injured

from cutting himself on broken glass, his father refused to do anything about it. During that time, it was Ambi who came to his rescue. His sister made sure he got proper treatment and she had even patched up his cuts herself. This moment in particular froze itself in his normally cold and calm mind. His own parents failed to come to his aid when he needed them. Yet, his sister was there.

"I shouldn't have left you there alone, Ambi." He stated. "I should've known that father had gotten into a fight with someone at the bar; he was bruised and his knuckles were tattered. I should've known he would've picked a fight with someone who would come back to get him." Of course, Alex truly had no way of knowing that, let alone the fact the man his father fought with had mob connections. "I should've taken you with me. Then it would not have mattered that they were killed." Alex paused for a moment. "No, that's not true. It would've mattered. . . to you at least. Even though you didn't particularly like mom and dad, you still loved them. I don't think I'll ever understand why or how though. . ." He trailed off, his eyes now flowing completely with tears. The man diverted his gaze from the tombstone to the ground next to him. That was the thing he admired his sister most for; she possessed a forgiving nature that was all but lost in the times. She was willing to help anyone who needed it and cared for people that most would not. She was good natured, fair, and kind. Of course it had to be her that died. They said that only the good die young, and to Alex, that was proven.

Right now, Alex was highly emotional and very deep in thought. If a man were to approach him now, he would have the most complete respect for them if they were half-way decent to him and the most dangerous venom if they were not. The Mercury Adept was certainly far from his normally seen self. However, no one, not even Alex himself knew what

he was truly like. He always came off as a cold hearted, silent, workaholic. The only person was not repelled by his sheer attitude was Picard, and Alex still couldn't understand why his fellow officer stayed around him. Most of the time he didn't care, but it was times like these he called such things into question.

Alex didn't want to be close to anyone anymore. Friends, family, loved ones; all of them were liabilities these days. He had cared and loved someone once, and now she lay in eternal sleep beneath the earth below. Yet, part of him couldn't escape it. Despite how frequently he felt about people, he desired to care. The thing was, he never could bring himself to do so. During his more restless nights, his mind fought subconscious battle on this topic; far more violent and erratic than what he wrestled with during the day. However, whenever he paid a visit to his sister, he fought a more obvious fight than in his sleep; whether it was to try to impress his sister or reassure himself, he still could not be certain.

"Ambi, I still remember what I promised you when you were laid to rest here." He sighed. "I promised I'd get revenge on the people who did this to you. I promised I'd bring them to justice." He slowly rose. "I haven't forgotten. I will never forget. That's why I joined the force; to see that they get what they deserve." The tears that were once flowing freely had stopped and were washed into the earth below. "I never understood why we had to live a lives like so many storybook characters; so many tortured souls. All of them were innocent people, yet they met with the worst of fates. Why was I chosen to lead a life that so many false figures could escape from, whereas I have no hope of it myself? Why were you the unfortunate one who left this world instead of me? You would've done so much more with your life." He

paused for several moments, then gave one final look at the stone before he spoke again.

"Good bye for now, my sister. Continue to rest. . . because I will not until I've fulfilled my oath to you." Alex slowly walked away, his face again a glacier, a stone, a statue.

Throughout history people have killed one another in dozens of stupid and pointless conflicts that could have been avoided. However, these conflicts were never avoided unless the treasury of one of the nations was near empty. More often than not, these conflicts sought to fill these coffers to the brim so that the nobility could live hedonistically while the hard working peoples in the fields continued to struggle just to live. Worse yet, these people were taxed immeasurably while the rich bathed in their gems and coins every dawn and dusk. The poor were subject to every whim and turn of the nobility and served as puppets for them.

It is now hundreds of years later and serfdom has supposedly been banned. However, nothing at all has changed. It is still the same: the rich dominate the poor mercilessly and are subject to their every impulse. The only difference now is that there is unemployment and we live in a city rather than in the countryside. The commoners still struggle for food and shelter, and even more for money. However, now we are no longer struggling in an everlasting competition, but rather fighting in it. People want nothing more than to come out ahead of one another in a society such as today's. This explains why we rob and cheat and murder each other to try to better ourselves. It explains organized crime and corruption. Everyone just wants money and nothing else. People are willing to discard their

compassion, humility, dignity, and humanity for a few worthless slips of green paper and a few gold slugs. This truly is the worst point of human history to date. We were more in tune with one another back when we sat in caves hitting each other over the head with clubs.

The working class has suffered enough under the lead heel of the bourgeoisie. Change is inevitable, and its time is now. It is time that the average factory worker and the simple housewife take up arms against such an ungodly system. It is time that the bourgeoisie pays for their sins with blood and tears. It is time to show them that the commoners are their equals and if not their betters. This uproar against the rich should be remembered as the purging of the oil from the waters of humankind.

Once the rich have been shown their proper place at the feet of the hard working and honest people that are the proletariat, a new government should be set upon the ruins of the previous. This government should be fair to all the peoples of the planet, unlike that pitiful excuse of a system known all too well as capitalism. The new order would be completely incorruptible and would treat all as equals in every possible respect. Men, women, Angaran, Proxian, Gondowondian, it doesn't matter. All people will share the wealth and share the same status. Because of this, strife and hatred from have and have-nots would cease to exist. There would be no more fighting over property and no more arguing over wages. Eventually when people attain full acceptance for this government, there will be no need for it further. Once people understand completely the good of this system, the human race will no longer have a need for government.

Professor Kraden raised an eyebrow after reading this passage. "Sarten, do you honestly believe what you're

writing?"

"Of course I do. All of today's problems are because of the rich. They throw their money around as though they owned the planet." Wing replied, his eyes fiery with conviction. "If we did away with the concept of wealth we would all live together in peace!"

"And how would advancement come? How would science progress if there is no incentive?"

"How can you say that it wouldn't? The people who love what they do as scientists will continue to make new discoveries because they love to do so."

"And where would their funds come from if the distribution of wealth was equal?"

"Donations from the general public."

"Sounds like taxes, which you are so rabidly against."

"The donations would be purely optional."

"Then what promise do you have that the scientists would get the funds they would need?"

"Because people always want better conditions. Better medicine and health care would be something people would be willing to donate for."

"But the people who need it most are already spending their money on treatment and not on research. Can you really count on the people with no problems to help those who have them?"

"Of course I can. Once people understand that everyone is an equal, they wouldn't hesitate to help others."

Kraden sighed. He himself was a very liberal man, but his protégé was beyond just liberal. His student was among the most radical of the radical. His ideas were not only foolish, but he was blinded by his own enthusiasm. His own idealism drove him to what Kraden considered intellectual madness; if Sarten was a scientist, he'd probably be creating a monster out of corpses at this moment. Though Wing himself was harmless enough, Kraden was sure his ideas were no short of perilous. This boy's ideals could ignite entire revolutions and spill blood anywhere in the world. As much as the professor admired his student for being proud of his beliefs, he couldn't condone that they ever met with the public eye.

"Sir, if I may, it seems you aren't at all pleased with me." Wing said.

"I'm not pleased with your visions of humanity, I can tell you that." Kraden said. "I'm glad you paid such close attention to my history lessons, Wing, but I believe your ideas are poorly put together. All of the wars and conflicts I've taught you about have had some significance for one reason or another."

"But they all involved needless bloodshed by leaders who couldn't negotiate because they were too proud to do so."

"And how would your revolution be different than the wars of the past? If you cannot answer that than your ideals are nothing but hypocritical." Kraden said, waving his finger.

"The revolution would be different because that would be the last blood to be shed. It would bring freedom to all and make the world a better place! After the world came to see

what the true meaning of freedom is they would never wish to fight once more!"

"And what makes you think this war is just? Many of the rich may be cruel or unfair, but you cannot forget that throughout history there have been many noblemen and women who have made a difference by being kind and giving with their fortunes. Not all the rich are scum, Wing. I personally know two people who aren't, though one of them is dead now."

"Aside from Mr. Calvin and his daughter, how do we know that they weren't putting us down so we wouldn't revolt sooner? How do we know that every last one of those gifts didn't have an ulterior motive? How do we even know that they have a soul? An excess or a desire for wealth are the roots of all evil in humanity and I wish to pluck them from our species like weeds from a garden."

"You speak as though you are above temptation yourself. Would you feel the same way if you were to come into a sudden windfall?"

Sarten paused for a moment. "Yes, I would. Unlike the fools who possess money now I am capable of seeing the plight of the unfortunate."

"Suppose you were born and raised in a rich household. Would you feel the same?"

"Professor, you know as well as I do that there is no way to answer that question."

"That isn't true. It is a good bet if you were raised in a well-off family you would support capitalism. You would be no better than the very people you are persecuting in your writings and speech."

"Though just because they are raised in money doesn't mean they shouldn't know what right and wrong are! They should know better than anyone considering they more often than not get higher education!"

Kraden gave off an exasperated sigh, then looked at the grandfather clock in the university library. The hands read the time to be quarter after seven, and it was about time for the library to close. "As fascinating as this topic is to argue, it is time for us to leave. We don't want the librarians yelling at us again. You go ahead and go. There's a couple of books I want to check out before I leave."

"Understood, sir. I will see you in class tomorrow." Wing quickly gathered his papers and put them into his plain brown briefcase and quickly departed. After his student had left the library, the older gentleman rested his head on the table he was working on. Frustration raced through his mind and boiled through his blood. Why did one so brilliant have to be so stupid as well? He had thought through all of his teachings that democracy was the best government humanity could have, not some completely socialized mishmash that Sarten had spoke of. He couldn't believe his best student would go so far against his teachings. He supposed that it was an inevitable that the new generation would be completely revolutionary. Even so, all of his preaching and instruction about human nature had gone completely in vain. Kraden, though a very calm and rational individual most of the time, wanted nothing more than to jump on the table and start swearing violently to relieve his tensions.

Knowing that wouldn't be the scholarly thing to do by any means, Kraden simply gathered his things and left the library for his home. It was going to be a long walk, but the exercise might do him some good and make him feel better.

He paced down the dimly lit streets and brushed past several people; both parties ignored the interaction. As he passed down one of the last avenues before his home, he heard a familiar sound. The tune of the ivory keys was unmistakable. He looked to his right and saw his favorite bar well lit and decently crowded. He could see through one of the front windows Isaac sitting at his piano, eyes closed and fingers ghosting over the keys. The music that came from within were like a siren's call to the old scholar, one he found impossible to resist.

He entered the bar unnoticed by most of the patrons, although Felix was quick to exchange a greeting, and Gareth was soon to follow. Only a moment after that Jenna gave him his favorite gin and had set up a chair next to Isaac's piano. Kraden smiled deeply as he took his seat, and thanked his hosts sincerely.

Once Isaac had finished his previous song, he looked directly at the scholar. "The usual, professor?" He asked, voice quiet but solid.

"Yes," he replied, "yes, that would be nice."

***Chapter 8*: Mirage**

The door to the tavern swung open wildly, and in stampeded a lone figure that could make up an entire herd. He charged in with the biggest smile imaginable, his teeth shining with an unearthly joy. It seemed something had completely revitalized this man, in both body and soul. The afternoon sunshine washed in from behind him, giving him almost an angelic glow.

"I've done it!" He cried. "I've done it!"

"What in the world is 'it'?" Jenna asked, looking concerned for her fiancée's mental health. The big oaf usually wore a smile, but none quite as wide as what he sported this afternoon. She walked around from behind the counter, to try to get his message out of him.

"I did it!" He yelled, exploding in a powerful laughter. He rushed over to Jenna and scooped her up into his arms, laughing and whooping the whole time.

"Whoa! Gareth! What are you doing? What's going on?" She questioned, helpless to get down from his powerful arms.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" With a grumble, she quickly struck him on the back of the head with her hand.

"Ow!" Gareth winced.

"Now then, are you going to tell me what is going on?"

"Jenna, my dear! I found a job! Not only does it pay decently enough, but it's safe! I work for the postal system! I'm a mailman!" The face on his future wife's face began to beam with the same enthusiasm that his did.

"That's great! My goodness, I think that's the best news we've had in months! I almost can't believe it!" As she spoke, he slowly let her down to the ground. As soon as she touched down, Jenna pulled the newly employed Mars Adept into a congratulatory kiss. After they separated, they joined together in joyous laughter. "I'm so happy, Gareth! You've been searching for so long and to find out you got such a good job makes my worries fly away! When do you start work?"

"In three days. It'll be a busy job and I'll spend a lot of time on my feet, but it's truly better than working in a factory or something. I wonder what your brother will say when he finds out!"

"He'll be thrilled!" Jenna laughed, wrapping Gareth in an embrace. Well, it was more of a strangling bear hug than a loving press, but given how the two of them worked, it had the same effect. He returned the strong hug, but with considerably greater force due to his rather large girth.

It had been a week and a half since Saturos and Menardi left from their visit. Little had happened since that time, save for the regulars dropping by for their drinks and billiards. Felix had seemed a little troubled shortly after his friends departed, but it came off as little more than minor financial troubles. Truthfully, it was nothing Gareth's new paycheck couldn't handle. While being a mailman wouldn't make them rich by any means, it was perhaps the most stable form of income the Mars Adept could get. Though the federal government of Angara was experiencing a difficult financial time, they never cut or delayed the wages of their employees. Though the bar was technically paying for itself, Felix's calculations indicated that the profit they were making was slowly but steadily dwindling. The depression seemed like it was getting worse rather than better, and it

seemed people were willing to spend less and less on drinks. The only source of revenue that seemed to grow within the bar was the tip money Isaac received after playing his melodies. Although his music was already fairly well known in this part of the city, stories of his abilities became local urban legends.

These legends were obviously very absurd. One telling of it dictated that there was an angel banished from heaven but protected from Hell that descended to earth to live with mortals; this angel was supposedly very gifted with an amazing penchant for playing the piano and singing. Of course, this was one of the most idiotic of all the tales told. The next legend was there was a mutant man who could sing perfectly while playing the hardest songs using only his toes. The mutant man supposedly crawled up from the sewers and took up residence in a local tavern for no other reason aside from boredom. It was undecided by Felix which was the more preposterous of the two.

Isaac of course had heard these tales, and if he was one to do so, he would've laughed at them. Considering laughing wasn't part of his nature, he noted that every person who actually believed these tales was a fool. And considering how many fools Isaac already believed there to be in the world, the legends did much to further his theory of the stupidity of mankind. He honestly couldn't believe how any of these legends got started. Though, if he had to venture a guess, he'd say it was a regular that had far too much to drink one night.

Garet and Jenna found the foolish stories a rather amusing diversion, especially considering how flustered Isaac seemed to get whenever one was told. Naturally, they found this very entertaining and amusing to watch. The couple would constantly tease Isaac when he wasn't in an obviously foul

mood, and most everyone who lived with them would get a good laugh or two from it. The teasing was good natured, so it rarely really bothered Isaac, though he would've preferred to be left alone. Though now with Gareth gainfully employed, it was likely the teasing would slow to a halt, at least for awhile.

"I still can't believe it. All of your hard work has finally paid off!" Jenna said, almost in tears. She looked up to the sounds of footsteps coming from the upstairs. Sheba soon appeared from the stairwell and looked at them, somewhat puzzled.

"What's going on? What's with all the shouting?" She asked. The Jupiter Adept looked back and forth between the fiancées and noticed an absolute elation on Gareth's face, and almost shocked disbelief on Jenna's. She had heard the noise from clear up in her room, but she had tuned out the words because of her writing.

"I'm employed!" Gareth replied, grin not fading at all.

Upon hearing this, Sheba's eyes grew wide, and they shone brightly. "Wow! That's great! How are we going to tell the others when they get back?"

"Well, I have a plan. This might be a lot of fun." Jenna said, giving off her trademark devilish smile that always send a cold chill of fear through Gareth's spine.

"I don't like the sound of this..." He said.

"Trust me, dear." Jenna giggled. "It'll be the funniest thing the two of us have done since the time we switched Felix's favorite beer with that dish water."

"Um, Jenna? I don't think he's exactly forgiven us for that yet."

"He'll get over it." She smiled.

"Oh boy. I am not getting involved." Sheba said, shrugging and heading back upstairs. "This sounds far too dangerous and stupid for my tastes."

Isaac grumbled as he opened the door to the tavern. Night had already fallen and he'd spent the whole day making the rounds looking for work. He took his hat off and almost slammed it on the hat rack by the door. Certainly, the Venus Adept looked more frustrated than usual tonight. He knew it wouldn't be long before he'd have to start playing his piano, but he wanted to rest beforehand. The exhausted Adept sat at the bar and put his head down on the counter. All he wanted to do was to get a nice, hot cup of tea and then sit down to play his piano for the night. That would make him feel better. It usually did, after all.

"Welcome home, Isaac." Jenna said, walking behind the counter. "You look..."

"Like a total wreck." He cut her off without looking up. "I know."

"Ooh, really bad day, huh?" Jenna asked, resting a hand on his hair. This prompted a bit of an irritated grunt from Isaac, but she chose to ignore it. "You want to talk about it?"

"No." He flatly stated.

"Just your tea, then?" She asked, mildly irritated.

"Please." He almost dozed off with his head resting on the table and his arms shielding his eyes from the light. The back of his head pounded and throbbed, almost as though he was hit from behind by a mugger. The darkness he sheathed himself in was a reprieve from the harsh daytime

he had. If anything over the past few months, Isaac had grown to despise daylight. It only meant rejection. He had taken to the night like an owl, enjoying the sunset and seeing the moon rise above the rooftops and smokestacks. The night was harmless, still, soothing.

"Are you okay, Isaac?" Jenna inquired, sitting his tea in front of him.

"Headache," was his only reply. He looked up and took the teacup in his hand and sipped from it. Jenna had prepared it just how he liked it. She had slipped in a little bit of honey to sweeten it some and to smooth it out. His face softened some and his eyes became less icy and irritated.

"There now. Feel better?" She asked. The piano player nodded in return, sipping it again. "Good. I'll leave you to it then. Just relax and don't worry about getting to play your piano right away." Isaac nodded again, and Jenna slipped out from behind the counter and walked up the stairs, passing Felix, who was at the landing.

"Hey sis. Did Isaac just get back?"

"Yeah, and don't bother him. He's in one of his moods tonight." She said quietly.

"More grouchy than usual, huh? Man, I wish we could just knock that out of him. Or at least, get him to smile a little more often." Felix replied. He noticed a slight sigh from his sister after he made the statement. "Sis?"

"Let's... go in your room to talk." She replied, walking into his bedroom on the far end of the hall. With a shrug, her older brother followed and closed the door behind him. She had already sat down on the foot of his double bed, with her

head already in her hands. He sat down beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

"What's on your mind?" He asked, his voice steady and calm. Like his normal demeanor, it was warm and friendly. "Is it Isaac?"

She nodded slightly. "Yes. I'm really worried about him. He's like another big brother to me, you know? You and Isaac have always been there with encouraging words. It's hard seeing Isaac always acting sour."

Felix chuckled lightly. "Yes, it is. He's not the easiest person to deal with, no way. Though it is just like you to want to help him. Have you talked to Gareth about this? He'd probably be able to help you more than me."

"Of course. Gareth's more at a loss than I am. In fact, he's more worried than I am! He just never says anything to anyone... the big lug doesn't like to talk about his problems with anyone but me."

"Makes sense." Felix replied. "Gareth's always been outgoing, but he's never been much for troubling other people with his problems. He's such a giving and kind man. I'm glad you fell in love with him."

"It wasn't hard." She laughed lightly. "He's... the best. He really is. I wouldn't want to marry anyone else. Sure, he has his rough edges sometimes, but that's one of the things I like most about him."

"You know, for a long time before he admitted to loving you, he thought you were in love with Isaac."

"Isaac?" Jenna laughed. "Never. He's a nice guy too, but... he really isn't my type. He's too quiet and brooding. I'd go nuts

if I had to marry him."

Felix smiled warmly. "I'm sure you would. I never saw you falling for him. Nor did I ever see him falling for you." He released Jenna from his arm, and leaned back. "My dear little sister is far too energetic and lively. Far too hot-headed and argumentative for Isaac to be happy."

"What do you mean by that!" Jenna asked, raising her fist in mock anger at her brother. Instead of hitting him, she quickly snatched up his pillow and beat him with it a few times. Eventually, Felix managed to wrestle it from his sister's grip.

"That's about enough of that." He said, tossing the pillow aside. "Now then, what about Isaac is bothering you?"

"Well..." She paused. "You know I want to help him. And I think I have a way."

"I'm all ears." He said, curious as to what his sister had come up with. How bad could it be?

"Felix, I think what Isaac needs is something a little more subtle than a job. Something that will be more fulfilling beyond monetary value." She paused.

"You mean he needs to find something to care about?" He replied. "Sounds like a good plan. What'd you have in mind then? A kitten? A canary?"

"No. Something... a little bigger than that."

"Jenna, we couldn't keep a dog even if we could afford it." Felix replied, completely oblivious. "There's simply not enough space."

"Felix, it isn't a pet." Jenna sighed, frustrated. Her brother was being unusually slow tonight. She couldn't tell whether it was unintentional or if he was feigning ignorance. He had been known to play dumb when the situation called for it, so sometimes his behavior was difficult to predict. Regardless of whether he was joking, she continued. "I'm talking about finding a significant other."

"Ah, love." Felix sighed, finally catching Jenna's drift. "If only it were that simple, sis. Isaac's not exactly a good bachelor. I imagine there aren't many women who'd like to deal with that all day long."

"Well, I think I know of one woman who would be perfect for him." She said, a catlike grin forming on her face. Felix knew right away that she already was plotting something, but what it was, he couldn't know. Before she continued, he raised his hands to chest level and prepared to cut in. However, Jenna did not allow this. "Felix, don't you think Mia would be perfect for our little piano player?" The tone of her voice was almost playful, like she relished the very idea of seeing Mia stand by his piano, enraptured by his soft music and singing voice.

Felix closed his eyes and brought a hand to his chin. Jenna was set in her way, he could tell. Nothing he could say or do would detract her from this idea. Trying to budge Jenna on this sort of issue was like trying to push a boulder up the face of a sheer cliff. He opened one eye slightly and glanced at his sibling, whose eyes flashed with the cunning of a fox. Finally, he opened his mouth to answer the question she had given.

"Miss Mia is a very beautiful woman. She is kind and considerate, soft-spoken and intelligent. I believe Isaac could come to love her in time." He said, with a sort of

sagely nod. "However, we can never force love on him. To do so would make him push it away all the more intently." He crossed his arms, and looked to the ceiling. "More importantly, however is how Miss Mia feels about him. It would do Isaac even less good to fall in love with a woman who does not feel the same."

"Well, I'm not really sure how she feels about him on that level. She thinks of him as kind, at least to some extent." Jenna fell back onto Felix's bed, laying down and sinking slightly into the mattress. It was soft and slightly lumpy, but it still managed to be comfortable enough for her eyes to drift to half mast.

"I think that if you're really intent on trying to set them up, you should be subtle. I'm sure you've thrown hints at Isaac at the very least... that is, if you still play the same cards as you did when you were trying to manipulate Garet into admitting his feelings for you. I'd suggest against that in the future." Felix said, still staring up.

"What would you do?"

"I'm not really sure. Though I would try to have Miss Mia spend more time here and let her see Isaac a little more often. Not only would this give her the chance to better see Isaac for what he is, it would give Isaac the time he needs to grow used to her."

"Would that really work? Do you think that they would ever fall for each other?"

"That's up to them and only them. We can't make it happen." He said, rising. "I can't help you with this directly, you know. It is not my place to try to influence either of their lives." He turned around and helped his sister stand. "Be careful. I want the best for Isaac too, but remember that it is

not always wise to play Cupid. We can talk more about this later if you want, but right now, I need you downstairs getting the place ready for the rush. I'll be down to help you shortly."

Jenna nodded. "Thanks, Felix. This means a lot."

"Think nothing of it." He said, watching her leave the room. After she left, he closed the door behind her and he started to change his clothes for the shift.

What a mess. Felix thought. I can't believe she's going to try to go through with all of this. He took off his day shirt and tossed it with disregard onto his bed. I want Isaac to be happy as much as anyone, but I can't bring myself to tell Jenna that Mia's probably not the right one for him. He paused as he slipped his right arm into the sleeve of his less casual evening shirt. No. Not so much the "right one" as we know next to nothing about her. People come in here all the time wearing facades. It's difficult to separate the real being and the mirage. All we know about Mia is that she is just that. Mia. He slipped on his shirt fully now, and his overworked fingers fumbled with the worn buttons on the front. Just who is she? She seems nice enough, and she's hit off with Jenna really well... I suppose she might not be a bad person. But... there's something strange about her. I'm sure I've seen a picture of her somewhere before. He sat down on his bed, unlacing his shoes and changing his socks to a fresh pair that was no less worn than the previous.

Though, I suppose if the Mia we've seen is the real Mia, she might be a good match for Isaac. I still have my doubts, though. Isaac's never been too interested in the idea of love. He's not the type. He never has been. Even if Mia does somehow fall in love with him, I doubt very much that any

gesture she could make would crack him. He's kindhearted deep down, we all know that.

But.. he's become so sour... downright unpleasant at times. I know he lost his family along with the rest of us, but why is he so much more bitter than the rest of us? Even just after his parent's passing, he wasn't nearly this ill-tempered. I know he's angry about not being able to find a job, but there's more to it than that. There has to be. He slipped his shoes back on and tied them with relative ease. He rose from his bed and reached into his dresser to pull out his black over-vest and his bow tie. I don't know about him sometimes. Sometimes I think he's as much a mirage as most of the guests we get.

He slipped his vest over his head and straightened his shirt out from underneath it. *Ugh. I hate dressing up like this every single night. I don't like this vest, and this tie makes me look like an idiot.* He glared down at the tie which he held in his hand. He wanted a real necktie, but they really couldn't afford one. He was lucky even to have this bow tie... it was left by a customer several months before who never since returned. Felix felt kind of guilty for wearing it when it wasn't really his, but if he wanted to look at least somewhat professional, he'd have to.

As he fumbled with the tie, he continued to let his mind wander. *I hate doing this every night. Going down there, encouraging people to drink just so we can make a living. I hate seeing people drown their sorrows in alcohol. It accomplishes nothing. All it does is make them all the blunter. It makes them bitter, harsh, and often unreasonable. The drunken stupors that they put themselves in does nothing but add more illusion to the façade so many of our customers like to cultivate. No one's honest with anyone else anymore. Hell, no one's honest to*

themselves, either. Always they lie to themselves, never taking responsibility for their actions.

"Why is that?" Felix whispered. "I don't understand."

Perhaps they haven't realized just how much they lie to themselves. Society has probably conditioned them not to realize their own faults. Blame someone else, they say. It's easier than taking what you have coming. The rich do it, the poor do it, the fortunate do it, the downtrodden do it, the women do it, the men do it, the mayor does it, and even I do it. But... why?

"Why?" Felix said, leaving his bow tie only half tied around his neck. "Why do I do it?"

Why do I keep doing this to people? I sell them this... mind poison. I cultivate this blame shifting. I give people the means to escape their responsibilities. I let people delude themselves into a trance of inebriation where they lose all touch with reality. A trance which is too addictive to escape. I'm no better than any of our mirages. In fact, I'm worse. I'm the one who forges these falsehoods. I push those toxins on them with nary a second thought. What kind of man am I?

He looked into his own eyes in the small mirror in front of him. They were welling with tears, but the reflection looking back at him was harsh and unrelenting. The brown eyes in the mirror pierced him through like a bullet. The mirror Felix looked at him, interrogated him, bereted him, scolded him like a child.

Why do I lie to myself?

"I don't know."

Why do I lie to others?

"I don't know."

Why don't I change?

"I cannot."

Why do I hurt people? Why do I force them into a state where they cannot tell the truth themselves? Why do I poison them?

"I... have to protect my family. I have to keep them sheltered!"

Why can't I find a better way?

"There is no better way. I cannot make money any other way."

Of course there is a better way. I'm only deluding myself.

"But what is it?"

Truth.

"Truth?" He paused, turned away from the mirror. Though he understood what truth in relation to morality was, the very definition of *true* truth escaped him. He stood back, pondering, taking it all in, carefully thinking in his mind. All of his conscious thought was in absolute chaos.

He blinked, and looked back at the mirror. He saw himself there, confused, lost, and vulnerable. There was no anger anymore. The Venus Adept fingered for his tie once again. His knot was almost finished, but before he made the final tug, he undid it and slipped the tie back in its proper drawer. With a sigh, he removed the black vest, and put that away as well. Straightening his hair, he looked once more into the

reflective glass. Felix stared back at himself for another good minute before he finally sighed, and left his room.

"Ah, there you are Felix. What took you so long?" Jenna asked, seeing her brother emerge from the stairwell at long last. She looked at him carefully, noticing his dress shirt was wrinkled as though he had already tried to put his usual vest on, but then later removed it. "Where's your vest, Felix?"

"I didn't feel like wearing it tonight." He replied, with a simple shrug.

"Okay. Fair enough then." She said, finishing cleaning the last of the mugs. They were ready for opening more than half an hour in advance, thanks mostly to Gareth helping Jenna clean up after he got home early from his successful job hunt.

Felix looked around the main bar room. Everything was still in place. Jenna was behind the counter, and Gareth sat on a barstool in front of her, his nose buried in the morning's Tolbi Sun newspaper. Ivan had his head down, dozing on one of the tables their guests would be sitting at later that night. Felix wagered that the young Jupiter Adept had spent all day looking for a job, and was tired from all of his walking. Sheba sat across the table from Ivan, her paper and pencil in front of her, quietly scribbling away on whatever project she decided to pick up that day. Isaac, of course, was at his piano, looking over and silently reading his music in his head. Felix didn't even know why the piano man bothered to even look at his sheet music anymore. He knew almost all of it by heart, and he even had an ear for improvising his own music if the need arose.

In fact, Isaac himself didn't know why he bothered either. It was all the same to him. He knew every last sheet down to

the time, the octave, the note, and the beat. Sometimes he didn't remember the piece completely, but then again, he had played so many different songs during the course of his life, sometimes they ran together, especially on nights like tonight. The piano man's mind blurred with the events of the day. A few employers he looked at did not gracefully turn him down. In more than one place, he was belittled and mocked openly for being so quiet. He refused them a reaction in person, but his blood was hot stew in his veins. If he had no fear of the repercussions, the Venus Adept would've probably slugged his interviewers.

The worst denial he received came at the hands of a Calvin Steel representative. Isaac's physical size was demeaned, and he was branded with a child's build and was mocked by not only his interviewer, but by his assistant and a pair of employees as well. Isaac never fancied working in a steel mill, but if they were hiring, he couldn't afford to be picky. Still, he wished he could've received a more polite dismissal. Needless to say, Isaac had a distinct distaste for the Calvin Steel Company now. A dislike that would probably never be done away with.

He sighed as he set down his music. He wanted another cup of tea, but he also didn't want to trouble Jenna for it. He had already been rude enough when he got home. He felt the need to apologize, but he preferred waiting until everyone who would tease him about it were gone. He rose from his seat and walked over to the counter, content with getting a cup of water to quench his thirst.

As he turned his back, he failed to notice the sly nod that Jenna gave to her fiancée. Gareth folded up the newspaper and set it on the counter and took a deep breath.

"Now, I know you all have had busy days today." Gareth announced, his voice clear, but not loud. "Jenna and I have something important to share."

Sheba's eyes immediately darted up, but her head did not. *Here comes the hurricane.* She thought, turning her eyes back to her work while prodding Ivan's ankle with her foot to rouse him from his light sleep. The purple eyed Adept awoke groggily, and gave off a quiet yawn before Jenna continued.

"Yes. It's something of a big announcement."

"It'll probably change how we live here somewhat."

"What?" Felix asked.

Isaac looked over to Gareth and Jenna. Something big was coming up. What could it be? Why were they making the announcement together? They were already engaged...

"What are you guys talking about?" Ivan asked.

"The change?" Jenna responded.

"Well? Is it good news?" Felix asked.

"It certainly is." His sister replied.

"Very good news." Gareth piped in.

Felix's face visibly paled, and twisted into a stunned shock. Ivan's eyes grew wide. Isaac merely turned all the more inquisitive.

"It's a big deal. Quite a major change coming up." Gareth nodded.

"Is it what I think... it is?" Felix stuttered, his face whiter than a fresh snowdrift.

"Yes, it's a major addition to..." Jenna replied, but she was quickly cut off by a collective cry.

"*What!*" Felix, Ivan, and even Isaac said simultaneously.

"You've gotta be kidding!" Ivan said, dumbfounded.

"Good thing you two are already engaged." Felix stated, resting an arm against a nearby wall.

Isaac said nothing further, but he was floored. Boy, this certainly came out of left field. Who would've guessed it?

"So you're telling me I'm going to be..." Felix started.

"The proud recipient of Gareth's new paycheck? Yes." Jenna smiled. Immediately, Isaac, Ivan, and especially Felix looked completely dumbfounded. "Gareth got hired as a postman today! He's got a new job!"

"Whoa. Wait, back up here. An addition?" Felix scratched his head.

"You didn't let me finish my sentence, you chowder head. I was going to say 'it's a major addition to our financial budget.' Damn, what were you guys thinking we were talking about?" She replied, folding her arms.

Gareth couldn't contain himself any longer. He immediately burst out laughing, slapping his leg. His face quickly turned red, and he rolled off his barstool. He banged the ground with his fist, trying to curb his fit of laughter. By this point Jenna had joined in as well, her laugh and his overtaking the bar. Sheba wasn't long later, because she knew the whole

thing was a ruse from the beginning. It was true, the looks on the faces of the boys were priceless. Once Ivan got over his confusion, he started laughing as well.

Isaac cracked a sly smile from his position at the piano. Gareth and Jenna hadn't changed at all. They loved pulling this kind of stuff even when they were young children, and to tell the truth, Isaac still found it amusing. Though he didn't burst out laughing like almost everyone else, the moment was enough to bring a little joy to him for a time. Though he didn't change his posture or composure, he still smiled slightly, knowing that no one in the bar was going to notice it anyway.

Felix, on the other hand, looked completely dumbstruck, like he had been blindsided by a battleship. Some color returned to his face, but he looked on to Gareth and Jenna with a sort of brotherly anger and love at the same time.

"That was rich!" Gareth gasped, trying to catch his breath. "Felix, you should've seen your face! It was a riot!"

"Yes, I suppose it was." He said, walking over to where his future brother-in-law lay on the ground. "But that was a horrible thing to do." The Venus Adept chuckled, turning to his sister. "Just remember, my dear sibling... the payback is always worse."

"Yeah, right." Jenna laughed. "I'll remember that."

"So, Gareth's got a new job as a postal worker then?" Ivan stated. "Sounds decently safe. Though it's probably going to be murder on your feet, Gareth."

"Yeah, I know." He said, sitting up. "But it'll be worth it, even if it's just a small amount of pay. It'll go a long way to making sure everything will be okay here."

"It will." Felix smiled. "It'll make a big difference. For now, let's celebrate Gareth's success. Jenna, do we still have any of that root beer left? You know, the stuff that was delivered here by mistake?"

"I think so." She said. Disappearing under the counter, she rummaged around looking for anything that resembled the non-alcoholic beverage Felix mentioned. She finally emerged, pulling a small box out with her. There were six brown bottles in the box, all of them capped and still fresh. "Yes. This is the last of it, though."

"I thought as much. We should probably order some more of that now that we can afford a little treat now and then." Her brother replied, giving a sly congratulatory wink to Gareth. The big Mars Adept smiled, slightly embarrassed, but did not make a worded reply. "Now then, chill those drinks quickly, Jenna. I think we can delay opening just a little tonight. Isaac!"

The Venus Adept turned to Felix like a clockwork man.

"You know what to do."

A nod came from Isaac, and with a crack of his fingers, he did what he did best.

The late night hours drew upon them too quickly as they closed up shop for the night. The customer load was surprisingly light that evening, with only the regulars showing up for their traditional drinks. Ivan and Sheba had long since gone to bed, and Isaac was the next one to depart. Felix, Jenna, and Gareth were the only ones remaining in the bar after the closing was finished.

"That was certainly a good night." Felix said. His eyes were sagging, crying out desperately for sleep.

"You look exhausted, bro." Gareth stated, looking over his friend. "I think you'd do best to go to bed. Jenna and I will do the last of the cleaning up. It shouldn't take too much longer."

"Nah. I've been here this long, I might as well help with the rest." He replied, until he caught an icy stare from his little sister. It was the kind of stare that no man could deny if they were smart. It was the type that sends a shiver of fear through even the stoutest of wills, scaring even the bravest man away. "Okay, okay. I'll go to bed." He sighed. "You two get some sleep as well. I sincerely doubt tomorrow night will be as easy as tonight was. See you in the morning, and congratulations again, Gareth." The Venus Adept quickly disappeared upstairs, his shoes making soft clunking noises as he dragged his feet in fatigue.

"That was beautiful tonight. It worked better than I ever expected!" Jenna giggled, wiping down one of the tables, struggling in particular to remove some now stale beer off the top. "Felix's expression was priceless. I don't think I've ever seen him look like that before!"

Gareth laughed quietly. "Yeah, it was pretty classic. Though I can't help but think we might've... gone overboard?" He scratched the back of his head absent-mindedly. "I mean, that was pretty cruel what we did to him."

"It was all for the sake of comedy. Gareth, I think I even saw Isaac smile through that. "You know we've done something right when that happens."

"I suppose that's true." Gareth agreed, helping Jenna clean off the final table. "Man, the guy never smiles. I can't remember the last time I saw him smile even just a little."

"It was weeks ago."

"The weeks have just been running together lately, dear." He sighed, polishing off the last little fresh stain off the tabletop. He took his rag behind the counter and tossed it in the small bin that held rags up for wash.

"I know what you mean. Time's flying and standing still all at the same time. It's like we're alive, but we're... a dream." She approached Gareth, and wrapped her arms around him. "But if it is a dream, at least it's a good one."

"It certainly is." Gareth replied, hugging Jenna back. "I don't know what I'd ever do without you, Jen." He felt a slight jab into his stomach from Jenna's fist.

"I told you not to call me that." She smiled up at him. Gareth's face looked slightly winded, and she knew she had made her point.

"Of course." He coughed. "Though, dear... I've really never said thank you to you for always being so supportive. Sure, we may fight sometimes... but I know you're always here for me if I need your help. Thank you, Jenna." He said, kissing her on the forehead.

"You're very welcome, Gareth. Naturally, though... I should say the same to you. You may be a klutz sometimes, you may be forgetful, and even hopelessly dense at others. But you've always been there too."

"Hey, does that mean I'm a knight in shining armor?"

She laughed. "Hardly shining. But you'll do just fine. I wouldn't want you to change. Ever."

"I wouldn't change you either."

"Even though I'm stubborn, overbearing, and frequently bad tempered?"

"Well... maybe we could lose the temper." He laughed, and then soundly he received another blow to the stomach.
"Ooh... I felt that one."

"Good, you were meant to." She replied, with her evil smirk that Gareth had come to both fear and love at the same time. She turned away, and headed for the stairs. "Come on, dear. We have to get some rest for tomorrow." Jenna took the first two steps up before she turned back around to the sound of Gareth's voice.

"Do I have to sleep on the floor again for making fun of you?" He joked, bringing up one of their most infamous and absurd, fights subtly. He approached her carefully, in mock fear.

"I'll think about it." Jenna replied, the same smirk still crossing her lips. *A good dream indeed.*

***Chapter 9*: Courage**

"What are you doing, rookie?" Alex demanded, looking over Picard's shoulder.

"Nothing," exclaimed Picard, slipping the papers he was studying into his desk.

"That's a lot of nothing." Alex frowned, shoving Picard aside to see what he was reading.

"What is *with* you today!" The younger officer demanded as he tried to restrain Alex from looking at what he had hidden. Alex resisted and overcame Picard with little trouble, forcing open the drawer and removing the contents forcibly.

Alex's eyes darted all over the paper. It looked like a coroner's report, signed and dated by the city's investigative department. Apparently a bunch of gumshoes wanted in on whatever happened on this case. Searching for a name, he flipped through a few pages before he finally discovered it.

"Autopsy papers?" Alex demanded, looking at his friend.
"Who authorized this procedure?"

"...I requested it." Picard replied.

"On James Calvin! I'm surprised this isn't all over the papers!" Alex hissed. "Didn't I tell you to just put this case behind you!"

"You did. And I didn't listen. And I won't listen now."

"What good would an autopsy do, you fool? You know as well as I do those medical idiots couldn't figure out what killed him even if it hit them in the face! An autopsy is only

effective if our victim was *shot*. There is no way an autopsy will show up anything else!" Alex slammed the papers down on the desk. Thankfully, it was late at night and nobody was actively manning the offices and cubicles nearby. Alex and Picard were the only two officers left in this area of the building, so the older Adept's frustrated voice didn't carry to the ears of eavesdroppers. "Calvin did not die of anything unnatural. I'm quite sure of that!"

It had now been a couple of months since the death of James Calvin, and he had been long since buried. However, Picard had only recently gotten hold of the reports issued by the coroner. The report was only about ten pages long, but Picard had been studying it meticulously since he got it. This affected his behavior at work, causing him to be more quiet and withdrawn than usual. Alex was not slow in picking up this sudden change, and his instincts quickly made him act. His gut had been right; the younger officer was indeed working on something under the table.

"Actually, Alex... I think we may have discovered something with that report."

"It's probably nonsense." He snorted. Alex crossed his arms and frowned down at Picard. "I told you that this obsession would affect you. What if the other officers find out? You'll get in some serious trouble trying to open a case when there's not one to be found. Leave the detective work to the gumshoes."

"I'm flattered that you're worried about me, but..."

"I'm not worried about you. I just don't want to be an accessory to this!"

"My, aren't we animated tonight?"

"Of course I'm animated. You've succeeded in pissing me off!" Alex fumed at him, resisting the urge to throttle him.

"Well, calm down." Picard said, rising from his seat. "And let me show you what the coroners found." The detective picked up the report from his desk, and flipped it to the third page. "Alex," he stated, "take a look at paragraph two. I think you might find something interesting."

With a grimace, the skeptical officer took the report and did as told.

"The subject did not die of any external injuries. There were no bruises, lacerations, or fractures present anywhere. Subject's skeletal structure remained stable and was normal. Subject's brain, aorta, and lungs all were nominal. The stomach, small intestine, and esophagus all were abnormal, each appearing unusually eroded. Subject's cause of death remains unknown, however the unusual damage to the subject's digestive tract could have been a factor." Alex's eyes widened slightly as he read.

"We may have to talk to Miss Calvin again to see if her father had any unusual eating habits."

"Hm." Alex nodded. His face had paled, and his heart began to beat a little faster. A distinct possibility now existed that Picard may have in fact been correct when he guessed the death wasn't natural. "But are you sure you're not jumping to conclusions?"

"I knew you'd say something like that, Alex," stated Picard, waving a finger. "All the docs down there tell me that in typical 'healthy' dead people those injuries aren't present. Not only that, the doctors hinted at things to me in Calvin's medical records; the guy was hardly ever sick in his life, much less with an illness that could cause that kind of

damage. That means something must've caused them, right?"

Alex folded his arms, his eyes turning back to the cold, calculating spheres they normally were. "How long after Calvin's death was the autopsy done?"

"It took a little doing, but fairly shortly after."

"And it took two months to get these results?"

"Hey, those hospital folks are always busy. It's not like we have our own guys doing it, you know. I'm amazed they got around to getting me the report at all. There was a lot of red tape and loopholes we had to look for to get these reports to me legally."

"Hm." Alex muttered, leaning against another desk. The frantic and angered man was gone, leaving behind the original calm and collected Mercury Adept. Picard suppressed a smile, seeing Alex's coldness return. This meant that he was definitely on the right track; he always got like that whenever something piqued his interest. "Are you still intent on figuring out this case?"

"Yes, of course."

"And why are you doing it?" Alex asked, his voice chilling Picard to the bone.

"I... want to do it for his daughter. I still can't put her crying eyes out of my mind. She deserves justice for her father, don't you think?"

Alex paused, cocking his head slightly. His mind briefly crossed back to his own loss, and how it still weighted on

him so. Turning his back to Picard, he muttered his answer in a more gruff than cold manner. "She does."

A soft wind blew through the bar, rustling the newspaper in his hands. The chill of autumn was in the air through the streets, but he didn't care. It was a nice reprieve from the painful, often unbearable heat of summer. Even though he didn't care about the weather, the piano player was surprised just how fast this year had gone by. Or rather, how much it all ran together.

He took a sip from a cup of tea that he had made earlier. It was getting cool and was growing distasteful, but he dealt with it. Ignoring the unpleasant aftertaste, Isaac turned to the next part of the newspaper. Even the small, three page sports section was filled with bad news, mostly about how the local baseball team was starting to go bankrupt with the lack of attendance. It came as no surprise, as tickets were only growing more expensive. Even admission to motion pictures was getting pricy, so his whole family made even less of an effort to go see one on a weekly basis.

Nothing at all seemed to be getting done about fixing the depression. The mayor of Tolbi was proving all but useless in that regard. Even the national level legislative bodies were doing an unsatisfactory job at best. The country needed leadership, someone who could take charge and fix everything. Lack of initiative seemed to be required to get into those positions, however. This disgusted Isaac to no end.

Growing weary of reading the rather discouraging paper, Isaac set it aside. Closing his eyes, he tried to feel out piano

keys on the bar in front of him, ghosting out what might be a new melody for the future.

It was times like these he could actually relax. Thinking about music normally put his mind at ease. Better yet with everyone gone, he had no one to distract him. Gareth was out delivering the mail, while the rest of the household went to market to fetch anything they might be able to afford. They had actually left Isaac behind without asking if he wanted to go. But that suited him just fine. He disliked shopping, and he rarely went to market with them anyway. Besides, he got peace and quiet this way, and he got to enjoy it alone.

Or, at least he thought he would. There came a knock on the door as he entered into a refrain of his work in progress. He scratched the top of his head out of frustration messing up his already unkempt mane. Isaac looked to the door dismissively. Through the window next to it, he could see a familiar blue-haired woman in an equally familiar blue dress.

"Mia." He muttered, irritated. She probably wanted to talk to Jenna, and of course, she had to show up when she wasn't there. Annoyed by the unnecessary interruption, he rose from his stool to answer the knock. With a quick turn of the bolt and knob, he opened the door.

"Oh, good afternoon Isaac." Mia said, smiling slightly. She looked at him intently, and her smile seemed sincere.

"Did you come to see Jenna?"

"Yes. Is she not home?"

"She's off with her brother and the Jupiter Adepts," replied Isaac. He watched as he saw a growing disappointment in Mia's eyes. She was about to turn away when he continued, albeit reluctantly. "Why don't you come in and wait for her?"

"I wouldn't want to bother you, Isaac."

"Don't worry about me." The blonde Adept stepped aside, motioning for her to come in. She did so, stepping in cautiously.

"Thank you."

"Don't worry about it." He muttered, walking back to the bar to pick up the newspaper again, considering he wouldn't be able to think on his composing. He flipped to a random story after he sat down, pretending to be interested in it. Ignoring Mia who took the stool right next to him, he continued to read.

She was silent for quite some time. This wasn't unusual between the two of them to sit around in awkward silence. She had been coming to the bar much more frequently as of late, and she often ended up spending time around Isaac. Most of the time, it was because he was around while she was talking to Jenna and Garet. He kept silent most of the time, but his presence was always announced by it, oddly enough. It was odd; his silence was always louder than his voice. There had only been one other time when she came to the bar when Jenna wasn't home, and she was let in by Isaac. They kept virtually silent the entire time; it was only broken when Jenna returned. It seemed like today was going to be a repeat of that day.

The daughter of the late tycoon studied the Adept carefully as he read the paper. He was definitely focused on not paying any attention to her. This wasn't what bothered her, of course. Mia could see latent frustration on his brow. She held in a sigh. When she first met him, she found him handsome and almost attractive; oddly charming. After he was willing to give up his room, he made a good impression,

but since then, he had proven to be nothing but spiky and unpleasant. Jenna constantly reminded her that Isaac was a good person and actually friendly, but she had since come to debate that. Not one to normally give up, she wasn't quite ready to let go of that hope just yet.

Debating whether or not to speak, she watched his expression intently, but turned away the moment his eyes darted to glare at her. His expression soured when he turned back to his paper, but it quickly leveled out. The glare was unusually cold, and it sent a chill up her spine, but what really upset her was his dour look. That angry stare resembled the same ones she received at work.

Every day it was the same. She would walk in, seeing many of the executives and desk workers glower at her, as if she was never good enough to fill her father's shoes. Very few looked at her with a smile, save for a few secretaries and John Morris. Oddly enough, some of the women working as assistants weren't happy to see her work in the highest position in the company. Many others were actually pleased, but held their tongues out of fear of losing their positions. Regardless, the vicious looks still hadn't stopped and neither had the passive resistance against her. Frustration welled up in her quickly, reaching the boiling point almost instantly. She came here to relax and be with friends; to be treated equally, not to be looked down upon as a nuisance. This was the final straw.

"Isaac, does my presence really bother you so much that you always have to be so sour!" She demanded, her voice high in volume and unusually powerful.

The piano player nearly fell out of his chair. He hadn't expected the sudden outburst and barely managed to catch

onto the edge of the bar. "What!" He asked, still flustered from the stumble.

"You heard me." She stated, folding her arms after turning to directly face him.

Isaac raised an eyebrow. *Where did this come from!* He thought.

"Every single time I come here, you're always like this. The only time you seemed at all sociable was when Felix's friends were visiting. Now I'm beginning to think you only offered hospitality because you were required to," Mia fumed. Her voice kept getting louder. "Would it kill you to be *nicer* now and then Maybe if you actually *tried* to make friends you'd be happier!" She turned away before Isaac could say anything.

"Now, wait... listen." Isaac tried to cut in, his voice ripe with annoyance. He raised a finger as he spoke; a gesture he made more out of reaction than intent.

"No, you listen to me!" She said, spinning back around. "You just don't care about others. You may care some for your family, but for anyone else... nothing. Even then, you still care more about advancing yourself than their well-being! Maybe if you learned to actually give a damn about other people you might become happier!"

"You're full of it!" He shouted back.

"I know times have been tough for you. But you're not the only one who has problems! Everyone in this damn city does! You know that! Stop being so morose when you have everything you need to be happy! You're a lot luckier than most of the people in this city, Isaac! I'm tired of you being

so blinded by self-pity that you can't so much as be thankful for what you have!"

"Since when do you think you know me!" He demanded back, getting off his stool. "You've 'socialized' with me not even a dozen times in the past couple of months. Since when does that make you an expert on how I think!"

"Your actions are a pretty clear indicator!" She retorted. "You're always moping about like a fool. I know you're angry about not being employed. Jenna's told me all about it. Felix and Ivan haven't had any luck finding a job either, yet I see Ivan constantly smiling and Felix hasn't let failure sap away his kindness. You? You're a nothing but a bitter husk of a man!"

"Husk! I'll have you know... "

"Shut up!" She snapped. "I'm not finished yet!"

"I don't care if you're finished or not!"

"You don't get it, do you? Have you ever really looked at yourself!"

"What the *hell* are you talking about?"

"Look in your eyes, Isaac." She said, her voice lowering from her yell. "My father... once told me that the eyes are the window to the soul. All I see in your eyes is constant frustration and cold depression. You may very well *be* kind, but you don't act like it and your eyes certainly aren't inviting."

"Why should you care about me?" Isaac asked, his volume decreasing, but his tone just as cold and distant.

"It's not just about *you*, Isaac. This is about your family too. Did you ever stop to think how much you hurt them by being so unpleasant? Jenna is always worried about you. You're like a second brother to her. How about Felix? He always is worried about others, and I can only imagine how much he's concerned over you. What about Gareth? He's your best friend, and he's always been around for when you need him. Yet since he was hired for that postman's job, I see more and more frustration in you every day. You're jealous of his success. You're jealous of your best friend."

All the color in Isaac's face bled away in an instant.

"You didn't even realize it, did you?" She asked quietly.

"I did realize it." Isaac admitted, looking away from her.

"Don't you understand now? It doesn't matter that Gareth 'beat' you to a job. Your family cares about you. More than they care about themselves."

Isaac did not reply. He merely turned away and walked to his piano, where he rested a hand on its top. A long silence between them ensued, but it was a peaceful silence rather than an awkward or angry one.

"Are you okay, Isaac?"

"Yes. I'm fine." He replied, quietly. His voice actually wasn't irritated; rather, it was much as pensive.

"I... think I'd better leave." Mia said, taking a step toward the door.

"No, you shouldn't." Isaac stated. "You came here to see Jenna, didn't you? So wait for her. She'll be... glad to see you." He stood up straight and turned for the front door,

taking his hat and coat from the rack. "Excuse me. I'll be back later." He then slipped out and walked off, looking much more ashamed than angry.

Mia was still thinking about leaving, but she sighed heavily. Half of her felt bad about yelling at Isaac and losing her temper, but the other half told her that the oft bitter piano player deserved it. Well, it was too late to take it all back now. She rested her head in her hands until she finally picked up the newspaper Isaac had left behind to see if it could provide any relief.

"Isaac? Are you okay?" Came a relatively small voice from the stairwell.

"Hm? Who's there?" He asked, looking over slightly from his piano. He recognized the shorter figure of Ivan at the base of the stairs. Ivan was dressed for bed, and Isaac had thought he had long since turned in. It was well late into the night, after all. He turned his eyes back to what he was doing before Ivan arrived. "What are you doing still up? It's not like you."

"I should say the same for you." The Jupiter Adept replied, walking closer. The lid over the keys was closed down and Isaac was resting his chin on a hand. "It's quite rare you're ever up like this. Not to mention you've been acting rather strangely most of the evening. Are you well?"

"I don't know." He replied, his voice distant. His gaze didn't turn toward the Jupiter Adept. They were firmly trained on the wall in front of him. His normally sharp eyes had been dulled into a flat shadow of their usual selves.

Ivan raised an eyebrow, scrutinizing the Venus Adept from head to toe with his keen purple eyes. Isaac was always confident of himself, but here he was, saying he didn't know about how he felt. Something was definitely troubling him. Not only were his eyes distant and weary, but his hair was more unkempt than ever and there were very dark, noticeable circles under his eyes. No, tonight he was a wreck. But why?

"Don't know? That's... even more unusual." Ivan quietly stated, pulling up a chair. He puzzled through his mind what could be the issue at hand. All he knew that was unusual about today was that Mia came for one of her visits. She had told them that Isaac let her in, but left on an errand shortly after he arrived. If Ivan was a gambler, he would have to put something happened on the errand. "Want to talk about it?"

Isaac gave no immediate reply, but rather shifted the weight on his hand. He narrowed his eyes tiredly and gave off a slight sigh.

"I'll take that as a no?" Ivan asked, trying not to sound disappointed.

"It's... difficult to explain," came Isaac's reply several seconds later. His voice tired, not exasperated like Ivan had expected.

He's willing to talk about it! Ivan nearly fell out of his chair when he heard his reply. Isaac never talked about himself. *What on earth could've happened to you, Isaac?*

"I've got all night." Ivan replied, trying to look nonchalant.

"I'm sure." Isaac muttered, suppressing a glare. For a brief moment, his eyes flashed back to the icy feel they usually

had, but quickly melted back. "Ivan, have you ever... not known yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever felt like you don't know who you really are?" His tone was quiet, barely above a whisper.

"What, like amnesia?" Ivan asked, confused.

"No!" Isaac snapped, putting a hand to his face and furrowing his brow. He paused a minute, and shook his head. "I... really don't think I know what I've become. Who I am. What I stand for."

"You!" Ivan blurted out. Isaac shot him another chilly stare, which quickly helped hold Ivan's tongue. "But... why?"

"Something happened that made me realize a few things about myself today. Ivan, I've been... well... a jerk for the longest time." Ivan didn't reply immediately, but he did appear to be trying to drink in what Isaac was saying, so the Venus Adept continued. "I haven't exactly been kind to everyone here, and yet... everyone else has been so patient in dealing with me. I've been moody, frustrating, and well... unpleasant."

This was indeed a change. Isaac was *regretful*, and not in things he *could have* done, but rather in things he actually *had* done. He was actually being open. Ivan had to work hard to suppress the urge to have a heart attack.

"And... well, all of it's kind of hitting me all at once." Isaac said.

"Well, it is true that you were often about as easy to talk to as a rock." Ivan said, keeping his tone serious, but being

careful not to be condescending. "But from what you're saying, I can kind of understand why you are acting like this."

"Yeah. It's been... quite a wake up call." The piano player sighed.

"If I may, what caused this sudden epiphany?"

"Epiphany?" Isaac asked, incredulously. "You've been spending too much time with Sheba. You're picking up her ridiculous vocabulary."

"Maybe so. But what caused you to have sudden change of heart?"

Isaac shifted in his chair, and looked worriedly to the stairwell. When he was quite sure no one else was listening, he replied. "What I tell you stays between you and me. I don't want anyone else hearing about this, got it?"

"You can count on me, Isaac." Ivan put a hand over his heart and then saluted with the other. "I won't say anything to anyone."

"When Mia arrived today, I was the only one here. You probably guessed that when she was here while I wasn't."

"Yeah, we all had assumed you went for a walk alone or something."

"I did. But that's not really important right now. I'm still not entirely sure how it all happened... or at least how it started. It all happened pretty quickly."

Ivan turned his head slightly, his ears almost twitching like a cat's. He opened his ears and allowed himself to listen to

each word, each syllable, of Isaac's speech carefully.

"I let her in, of course... and we sat down at the bar. I read the paper, and she just waited. And I really don't know what triggered it, but then she just flies off the handle and starts yelling at me." His eyebrows arched as he spoke, his voice getting a little irritated, but Ivan could tell it wasn't directed at anyone.

"About what?"

"About a lot of things... mostly in how I've been acting." Isaac scratched the top of his head idly, ruffling his hair further. Oddly, it seemed to give more order to the chaotic mess. "And well, most of that hit home, I think."

"I see," Ivan replied. "So she just told you how she felt about your behavior?"

"That's a polite way to put it," Isaac said, sounding just a tad sardonic.

"So that's what you're thinking about?"

"Yes," he nodded once, slowly. "It is."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you. Though, I do have something to say for you to think about."

"What's that, then?" He asked, trying not to sound impatient, but failing.

"Just what do you intend to do about it? About what she said? And about your attitude?" Ivan asked, looking at him with his eyes steeled. "What do you intend to do with what you've learned?"

The piano man paused for several moments before answering. "I don't know yet. I'm not sure."

"I don't believe you. What do you intend to do?" Ivan pressed. Again, Isaac hesitated. "If someone's words have affected you this obviously, you must act on them, one way or another. You can either dismiss what she told you, or you can listen to her and change. That is a decision you have to make on your own, but one that must be made sooner rather than later." Ivan rose from his stool and headed back for the stairwell. "Though, if you want to know what I think, I'll tell you," he paused, turning his head around to lock an eye with Isaac. "Personally, I think it is the weaker man who hides behind his pride and refuses to change. It takes a strong individual to stand up and admit he's done wrong, own up to it, and change himself accordingly."

With those soft words, the little Jupiter Adept walked upstairs, leaving the piano man alone in the bar.